





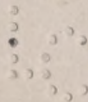
THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF OLIVIA

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BY

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LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.

91 AND 93 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK

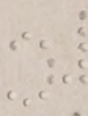
LONDON, BOMBAY, AND CALCUTTA

1907

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PUBLISHERS' NOTE.

THIS story originally appeared in the Weekly Edition of *The Times*, and is now issued in book form by arrangement with the Proprietors of that Journal.

CHAPTER I.

THE GARDEN LADY.

"I HAVE had the most delightful day," cried Olivia, looking up the steps. She was at the bottom and her husband was at the top, and the steps ran down into the shrubbery from a side door of the house. Before mounting, Olivia paused, and continued: "Quite a perfect day, Willie. A day to remember. I have enjoyed every hour and every minute of it."

"That's right." Willie, a broad man in a grey suit, with a roll of papers in his hand, smiled kindly and responded heartily from his superior altitude. "What have you been about?" continued he, descending, and placing a hand beneath his wife's elbow to propel her gently upwards. She was a slender creature, and despite the animation of her accents had an air which to his eyes invariably appeared to need support. "What have you been doing, eh?"

"Oh, doing?" Olivia laughed, and leaned upon the strong hand contentedly. "Oh, you Willie, that is so like you, and like everybody. Everybody thinks one must be 'Doing' something to be happy, whereas all one really wants—at least, all I ever really want, is just to *be*—'Blest day, it was a luxury to be,'—now, you wouldn't understand that, would you, you big, bustling Willie? Oh, my dear man, how you do smell of smoke,"—suddenly jerking aside from his kiss—"Poof-poof"—

and she caught at a bunch of moss-rosebuds swinging near, and buried her nose in them. "You needn't have smoked just before you came to meet me, Willie;" and the soft eyes were filled with reproach.

"'Pon my word, I needn't," quoth the big man, good-humouredly.

Olivia resigned herself. The world was full of monsters who would smoke, and would do all sorts of horrid things which to her were incomprehensible; and Willie, of course, was like the rest; but he was a good Willie in the main, and she bore with him.

He now pulled forward a low wicker chair, into which she sank with her own peculiar, graceful, undulating motion, and as he slipped a pillow beneath her head, she murmured, "Thank you, Willie," in the musical tones that were everywhere remarked upon as Olivia's beautiful voice.

"And so you have had a jolly day?" He stood looking down upon her, thinking how fair and pretty and cool she looked, and how well the pale blue ribbon at her throat became her. "I must own it is a lot nicer here than in town. It was beastly hot there, and the trains were worse still."

"I know; I pitied you," said Olivia, easily. "Nothing would have induced me to waste a divine day like this rushing about in trains and cabs. Oh, Willie, it was simply heavenly in the woods; I have been in the woods or the garden ever since you left; that is, of course, I came in for luncheon, but Thomas brought out my tea, and everything was so still and sweet"—she sighed with satisfaction and shut her eyes.

"And you didn't find the time long, little wife? I was half afraid you might be dull and lonesome, as I left so much earlier than usual."

"Now, Willie," she started up, roused on the in-

stant. "Now, how can you? You know that I am *never* dull, and don't know what it is to be lonesome. And a whole dear, delightful day out of doors among the flowers and birds is just what I *love*. But you would never understand that, Willie,"—and she shook her head at him ere she laid it again upon the pillow.

Willie chuckled. "Lucky for me I shouldn't. If I were in one part of the wood and you in the other."

"Oh, Willie, how funny!" Suddenly Olivia laughed outright; a merry, genuine laugh. "And we met in the middle, and fled from each other! But then, you know, you would never do that; you would never be able to keep away from me," continued she, confidently, "and you would be most awfully bored with your own company, and would be always peering through the trees to see if there were any one coming up the drive—and if you did see a figure, or figures, no matter whose, you would simply rush to bring them in. I can't think how it is you are so fond of people, Willie," she wound up, still amused at the picture fancy had conjured up.

"Oh, I don't know that I am particularly fond," responded he, placidly.

"Not fond? And you know you are always reminding me of houses I owe calls to, and hinting that we ought to entertain more; and if I once gave you your head, we should have our spare rooms full every month of the year."

"Easy now, I shouldn't like that at all."

"What would you like?"

"I think," said he, after a minute's hesitation, "that we are not very good neighbours; that we might do more than we do in the way of hospitality without living exactly in a racket. We have been married for some years, and——" he paused.

“And what has that to do with it?” A slight sharpness crept into Olivia’s tone. “What does it matter to any one but ourselves how long we have been married? Surely we have a right to lead our own life, the life that suits us best, whether we were married yesterday or twenty years ago?”

“I only meant, dear, that perhaps a little more is expected—that is to say, it is not as if we were a boy and girl newly setting up housekeeping, and with a lot of other things to think of,” ventured he, watching to see whether she would catch and resent his meaning—“your time is not taken up with——”

“A nursery,” supplied Olivia, promptly. “You needn’t be afraid to say it. I suppose I should have been fond of my children if I had had any, but, as I haven’t, I don’t feel the want of them. You know I have always told you so, Willie. I am sorry for your sake”—her tone softened, and she put out a hand, which he enfolded eagerly—“but as for myself, I really don’t know that—that they wouldn’t have been a little—just a little, in the way;” and she peeped at him over the bunch of sweet-scented flowers whose fragrance she inhaled delicately.

“That’s the best light to look at it in,” he nodded cheerfully. “That’s a capital idea. There’s no sense in hankering after what you haven’t got; but now, you see, here we are in this big house, with everything running smoothly, and you with all your time upon your hands; what I’m afraid of is that people might say it’s a bit selfish and niggardly of us to do nothing for anybody. There, it’s out. I often think about it, Olivia; but as you don’t seem to worry yourself, I didn’t like to bother you.”

“But you do bother me, Willie; you bother me very much. Oh, dear, why should you choose to-day of all

days to start such an odious subject? Now, don't say I began it. I didn't—at least, I didn't mean to. And as for pretending it is a new thing——”

“I didn't pretend that, you know.”

“You led up to it as if it were, and it's not; it's as old as the hills. It comes up every now and then as regular as clockwork. And I have told you so often, Willie, how I feel; and you know you do care how I feel. Of course, it is all very well for you; you are as strong as a horse, and you don't know what susceptibilities are, and how dreadfully people can jar on one—and after all, what can they want with me, when I want nothing with them, or of them, or from them?” protested Olivia, plaintively. “So very, very few people care for the things that I care for. Of course, if I could pick and choose, it would be an exquisite pleasure to have intercourse with those whose minds would assimilate with mine, who would appreciate the joys I delight in, and who would dispense with all commonplaces and go straight to the heart of things. I assure you I could revel in that kind of society, Willie; but since it is not to be had——”

“The other's not worth picking up?”

“It isn't, indeed it isn't.”

“For your sake, or for theirs?”

“I don't see that I need sacrifice myself on the altar of popularity. You are not going into Parliament, thank Heaven; and if I were to start rushing from house to house and showering invitations about, that would be the idea at once.”

“Be reasonable, dear. Your fancy flies like a bird on the wing,” he smiled patiently; “what need is there for ‘Rushing’ and ‘Showering invitations’? All I thought of was that we might begin by degrees to see a little more of our neighbours, rich and poor.”

“‘And poor’? Oh, Willie, you *don’t* want me to begin parishing?”

“Might you not do a little more in that way? Don’t most ladies living in country places interest themselves——”

“But this isn’t a ‘Country place,’” protested Olivia, eagerly. “I have always told you so. Of course, it is very nice; just the kind of odd rambling old house that pleases and satisfies me, but one of its great points is that it entails no troublesome responsibilities on either of us. *You* couldn’t undertake them, and all I am good for is to potter round my garden and in and out of the green-houses. The garden is a world in itself, and there is always something to do in it. I am quite content, Willie; only I want you to see that you can’t call a small domain like ours a ‘Place’.”

“Quite right, dear. But I fancy you misunderstood me. I——”

“Oh, don’t explain! Explanations are such tiresome things. You used the word, and I had to set you right, that’s all,” and Olivia smelt her nosegay again. But it was she, not he, who presently resumed the argument. “I don’t like to think you aren’t satisfied with the way we go on, Willie,” she murmured uneasily. “Of course, you are the very best husband in the world, and I never complain of you *really*. Not *really*, you know. But you have got some funny little cranks—you must own you have some cranks”—she paused for the admission.

“Tell me about them,” said he.

“One is a tiresome concern about what other people think and expect, whereas they are most likely thinking nothing at all and expecting still less—I mean, of course, as regards us. There is not a single family hereabouts with whom I should care to be on intimate terms; and if *I* don’t, why should *they*?”

"But there are some very nice people, and they are cordial enough when we meet."

"*You* are cordial, and take it for granted they are. You have a bluff, genial manner that compels a sort of response. Oh, I daresay you are more popular than I, but all the same, I don't believe either of us would shine in society, and luckily we don't care for it."

"Since you don't, Olivia——"

"Oh, don't put it upon me"—Olivia made a restive movement—"or rather, you may put it upon me if you like," she added, after a moment's thought; "but I know in my own mind that you would not be happier gadding from house to house, getting stout and red-faced from big dinners and champagne, than you are leading our quiet peaceful life, with everything arranged to suit your hours and habits. You know, Willie, it must be delightful to come down here to this perfect repose and harmony after the horrid turmoil of your business days."

"It is indeed, little woman. Although to be sure"—Willie was not without humour—"my business days are not quite so horrid to me as they would be to you. I can endure them, Olivia,"—and the corners of his mouth as well as his eyes twinkled.

"Well, then, since you can get as much talk and bustle as ever you like in your beloved City," quoth she, changing her front, "what do you want with more?"

"I did not say I wanted more, but I thought perhaps more might be wanted of us."

"You must know, Willie, that it would be absurd for us to pose as people of position and take any sort of initiative about here. You are only a plain London merchant and I am a merchant's wife, and have no wish to pretend to be anything else. But," continued Olivia, with a little flush on her cheek, "I can't help knowing

that while I haven't the birth and fashion and all the rest of it that goes down in the world, I have something—I am something—oh, Willie, won't you say it for me, I *am* different from the common herd, am I not?"

"You know what I think," said he, softly. He worshipped the woman at his side.

"And I can't come into contact with my fellow-creatures without realising this," murmured Olivia. "Their pleasures, their interests, the trivialities that seem so all-important to them never appeal to me in the least. I think, 'Dear me, what does all this matter?' when one and another pours out a flow of words about nothing—for it is chatter, chatter, chatter about the commonest, most everyday stupidities all the time—and I am simply seething with impatience to have done with it long before the tale is over. I don't care to know, I don't want to know, what this one said and what that one said, and to be asked if it isn't odd that So-and-so should do something or other that Some-one-else couldn't have supposed her capable of? Oh, Willie, you may laugh, but that is the sort of thing that women's conversation is mostly made up of, and I daresay men's too for that matter—and if I venture to put in a word of what *I* like, or to talk of a book I'm reading, or to throw out an idea that isn't just lying in the rut that everybody treads, I am met by such a stare!"

"I daresay you are a little over their heads. You are often over mine," and Willie nodded admiringly. "You are—let me see—a superior——"

"Oh, no, Willie, not that dreadful thing 'A superior woman'. Oh, not for worlds!"—and Olivia threw out her hands at him with an air he found enchanting. "That isn't me; indeed, indeed it isn't. The superior woman loves to talk about herself—oh,

Willie, how can you, how dare you?" But she blushed beneath his laugh, and he hastened to make the *amende honorable*.

"That was my clumsiness," said he, cheerfully. "There's all the difference in the world between talking straight to *me* and to people generally. Who can you talk to about yourself if not to your husband? And what other subject could ever be as interesting to him, eh, little wife? Well now, it's plain you don't hit it off with commonplace folks, and I'm rather afraid we can't import the other kind to this neighbourhood. You ought to have lived in the days of the salons, Olivia, when you could have packed your rooms with poets and philosophers. Jingo, you would have been in your element then."

"I should have hated it," said Olivia, quickly. "That is to say," amended she, after a moment, "I should have hated the worry and publicity of it. The continual excitement would have knocked me to pieces; and the dressing——"

"Oh, come, you generally do a bit of dressing, though there's no one but me to see. What do you call this now?"—and he drew out the long end of her sash which floated near—"this is an elegant performance, and quite the latest fashion, I daresay."

"My dear Willie, it is not the fashion at all. I wear a sash because I like it, and it does not in the least matter to me whether it is in or out of fashion."

"You always look tip-top; I don't want to see any one better turned out than my wife."

"Because I have a little taste," said Olivia, modestly. "And also because I have some character, sir. I wear what suits me and is pretty in itself—and you have just testified to the result."

"In my own coarse way," said he, his eye twinkling

again. "Well, we have got off the subject we started with, and I won't vex you by bringing it up again. Of course, the great thing is that you are happy, and that your life contents you; as long as you can say that, Olivia, I don't see that either you or I need bother about social obligations—and others. I only thought I'd mention it." He rose and paused; he had accidentally overheard a remark that morning which had led to the whole conversation above narrated. He had caught the words: "The Seafords are no good; they never do anything for anybody,"—and Willie Seaford's honest heart had been cut to the quick, and he had gone about throughout the entire day with a sense of something wrong, something which even the sight of his beautiful wife and the perfection of his beautiful home did not wholly do away with.

"I think I'll go in and brush off the dust," he said presently, and passed indoors.

It was now six years since the Seafords, as a young married couple, had taken possession of the retired and somewhat dull-looking house which his wealth and her taste had speedily transformed into one of the most charming abodes of the neighbourhood. Its very name had been altered to suit Olivia's fancy.

When standing empty, and when purchasers were desired on the death of the former owner—an old man who led the life of a recluse—the agents had considered "Beech Hall" an attractive and well-sounding designation, but the young wife had indignantly pointed out the lack of beeches and the absence of any hall-like pretensions on the part of her new domain. "It does not bear the hall-stamp," she said, laughing, and "Beech Hall" became "The Willow House". There were willows down by the stream, and Olivia loved willows. The stream meandered through meadows, and the well-

grown shady gardens which straggled down into their midst captivated the lady, and subjugated her husband.

“Aye, that would be just the place for you,” quoth Willie, who had wooed his bride in a secluded region, and found her love of retirement, as he found everything else about her, adorable. “You must have an outlet, Olivia. Some place where you can poetise and rhapsodise in the twilight. Oh, this sort of thing will suit you down to the ground”—and he surveyed the dell with its rich pasturage and sleepy brook—and then he turned to look at her. Had he, too, been a poet he would have added, “And thou, the spirit of them all!”—but as it was he only felt in a dim way that he was providing his gentle bride with what she wanted, and bestowing untold honour on the spot thereby.

For himself he was of the earth, earthy. A robust, wholesome weed who would flourish in any soil; his own likings or dislikings never gave him a moment's thought in the matter of a habitation.

It was enough for him that he should be near enough to London to pursue his business in the easy, leisurely fashion which was all it now demanded at his hands. He had inherited a partnership; and to put our readers into the possession of a secret which was the only secret Willie Seaford ever had from the wife of his bosom, he could have retired from any active participation in his affairs and lived handsomely on the fortune they had already amassed for him, had he chosen.

But, in that case, what on earth should he have done with himself? Such sport as he indulged in he took in Scotland, and a little of it sufficed him; he did not hunt, nor did he take any interest in agricultural pursuits—as a fact he knew nothing about them. On the days when he did not go up to town he lounged about; inspected what others had done, or were doing;

smoked a pipe or two in the stables; adjourned to the farmyard; poked the pigs; fed the poultry; and took the dogs for a walk,—but he often found the hours drag, and in his secret soul knew that he rose with renewed alacrity on the mornings which demanded his appearance in Lombard Street.

No, he was not cut out for a country gentleman; but since a rural life was to his wife's mind, he could play at it a little between whiles; and if only Olivia would have cultivated a little more neighbourly society, or cared to invite down friends from town—but here the worthy Willie would shake his head. "One can't have everything," he would aver stoutly, "and hang it all, if a fellow is married to the most charming girl in the world, it's hard if he can't be satisfied with her companionship as long as she is with his."

As for Olivia, her views were these: "Willie is not stupid. When I can get him to give his mind to a subject, he brings a good deal of natural intelligence to bear upon it. But he has not come of an intellectual family, and I ought not to expect too much. He understands me up to a certain point, and he believes in me altogether. I could not have borne any one who—Oh, how horrid of me!" she broke off short, and frowned at herself, alone though she was. "Oh, what a beast I am! To take dear Willie as if he were a sort of satellite, a hanger-on!"—and for the remainder of the day on which these ruminations took shape the unconscious Willie was the subject of so much tender solicitude and attention that he did not know what to do with it. It was a relief when the fit was over and husband and wife reinstated in their old positions.

As a child Olivia had been delicate, and being the sole object of her elderly parents' care, she had been early taught to believe that everything entailing effort,

energy or activity was to be avoided. Surrounded by watchful faces, and sedulously guarded from the everyday risks that the ordinary children run, it was hardly to be wondered at the little hot-house plant should develop into the dreamy, sensitive maiden, and finally mature into the unapproachable personage who was so little known and so seldom seen beyond the precincts of The Willow House.

“It would be too much for my wife,” was Mr. Seaford’s formula on every occasion when exertion, either bodily or mental, was required. He had married Olivia with the firmest faith in her fragility, and a certain pride in it. Her parents had surrendered to him their treasure, not indeed without reluctance, but with fewer misgivings than they could have believed possible; and on their deaths, which severally occurred within a short period of the wedding-day, it was intimated to their son-in-law that their best hopes had been fulfilled, and that as their beloved Olivia’s husband he was, in plain terms, a success.

Olivia truly (and gently) mourned for the old couple. They were so very much older than their age—while they had attained middle life ere she was born—that the loss out of her life was not what it might have been. Had she possessed no Willie—but, as it was, Willie’s devotion, his pervading, fostering, sheltering, hovering worship, was especially sweet in her sorrow; and she found some delightful books which gave her beautiful thoughts about it; and soft, trailing black garments which did not rustle and fret her nerves came down from her dressmaker in town, fitting to a nicety—and of course there could be no question of going anywhere, or moving in society of any kind, for a twelvemonth after each demise—so that on the whole Olivia’s grief was tranquil, and had its compensations.

For one thing, it was such a blessing to be let alone in that matter as to which Willie never could be brought to see quite with her eyes, to be released for the time being of the bogey which haunted her life, otherwise so congenial, so exquisitely uneventful.

Olivia hated events. A period of mourning, when she could dispose of every invitation and negative every proposal, was—bear with the word—Elysium to her.

And the less she did the less she wanted to do. “Oh, Willie, need we?”—and the wistful eyes would seek his so appealingly that he could not press the point; whereupon Olivia would fly to her writing-table. On such occasions, when it was desirable to act quickly, there would be no languor in her step; and the note would be despatched and the tiresome affair concluded ere her husband had a chance to put forth those troublesome second thoughts which are often more deadly in result than the first.

Sometimes it dawned on Willie that the fragile creature, whom a breath would have blown away in her teens, was no longer quite such a thistle-blow as she had once been; and he told himself—feeling almost like a traitor as he did so—that Olivia was never ill, seldom even ailing. As years passed she exhibited a keener interest in her own occupations, and a more healthy ardour in their pursuit than she had taken when younger. She spent hours in actual manual labour among her flower-beds, gaining flesh and colour thereby. She was wholesomely tired when the day was done, and slept the sleep of a child. By-and-by she began to rise early and take her place at the breakfast-table. The morning hours were so beautiful, she said.

And time never hung upon her hands, for if not potting, or budding, or bedding-out, she was here, there, and everywhere among the dumb animals she had gradu-

ally assembled round her, and of whose ways and habits she knew a vast deal, to her husband's continual amazement and admiration.

"You would make a splendid farmer's wife, Olivia," said he one day.

"Better than you would be a farmer," laughed she.

"Surely you are ever so much stronger than you were when I married you," pursued Willie. "I suppose now you couldn't——" but she knew what was coming, and took alarm at once.

"No, I couldn't, Willie. No, Willie, I couldn't. I can only just get along with my little trivial round—with Jenkyns and the garden, and Jerry and the pigs—with you, my dear Willie, to bring me the papers and news—and the rest of the day for my music, and books, and drawing. If you try to force anything more into me or out of me I should simply shrivel up and die."

"You haven't tried, dear. A few years ago you would never have believed you could do what you are doing now. I remember when it was almost too much exertion to walk to the end of the lane—and you drove twelve miles yesterday and were none the worse for it. Besides going over the old castle when you got there," added he, radiant at the recollection.

"Oh, that. That sort of thing doesn't tire me," rejoined Olivia, easily. "I don't mind how far I go if it is to see anything worth seeing; and I daresay now that I have once been to Ivy Moat I shall often go; but what I was afraid of was that you were going to begin about—I'll drive with you, Willie, whenever you like, so long as you don't ask me to stop at houses. Oh, Willie, Willie, I knew it—I knew by your face that was what you had in your mind. You can't get rid of that idea that one has no right to be happy in one's own way independently of other people."

"It would not be any very great effort just to call on the Gainsboroughs. It is so long since their cards were left here."

"What good would a call do? You know they wouldn't be satisfied with that. They would want us to go to their parties and things. And we should have to ask them here. And it wouldn't even stop there, for if the other neighbours knew that I could call on the Gainsboroughs, who live miles away, they would expect me to go to them. Of course they would. And all my beautiful, peaceful life would be at an end!" Her eyes grew large and mournful at the idea.

"I have said so often that you aren't equal to visiting——"

"'Calling' isn't 'Visiting,' Willie. I wish you would remember that, Willie. 'Visiting' means staying in houses, not poking in cards at the door."

"Yes, well—but listen a moment. If you would go only once a year to each house——"

"I tell you it would do no good. It would do harm. It would give rise to endless complications. 'Why doesn't Mrs. Seaford come to us?' 'Why doesn't she take part in our entertainments, our charities, our fusses and fidgets?' *That* would go the round immediately. And it is so much easier to keep out of *everything*; then no one can be hurt, and it is simply understood that I am an invalid—what? What are you laughing at?"

"An invalid who works like a galley-slave in her garden and drives twelve miles to explore a ruin!"

"One may do that and yet have no strength for other things. It is the talk, the noise, the hot rooms in winter, the glare and dust of the roads in summer, and the utter vapidness of it all at any time," cried Olivia, whose meaning was clear enough though not lucidly expressed. "I tell you again, Willie, as I have told

you a hundred times (only you never do believe me), that if it were worth it, if I could get the society I should like by struggling for it, I would brace myself up and struggle; but just to meet dull, commonplace people and be half killed by all the concomitants one must encounter in order to ferret them out, does seem a waste of force. I shudder to see myself as I might be if I gave in to your ideas. In this populous neighbourhood I should never have a day free; I should never be able to call my soul my own; and all the joys of my life, all the dear delights that fill my days and make me so independent of outside influences would be thrust into a corner, and perhaps end by losing their charm even for myself."

"What a picture!" said Willie, laughing.

But it is to be feared he was hardly repelled by it as he should have been, and it almost seemed as if the next minute he heaved an imperceptible sigh.

CHAPTER II.

THE AUTHORESS.

“WHAT are you grinning at?”

Colonel Thatcher, who, in virtue of his being a fairly old man with a very young daughter, occupied the seat by his wife's side in her victoria while Kitty perched on the ledge opposite, put the above question with his usual directness. Kitty was beaming all over, and for his part he saw nothing to beam at.

It was only the Seafords' carriage that flashed past, and to which, or rather to its solitary occupant, he had reluctantly to raise his hat.

He disliked Olivia—disliked her both actively and passively. Actively, because in several ways she had more than once crossed his path and obstructed his schemes, passively, because her high-swung barouche, with its glittering harness and pair of fine thoroughbreds, made his modest little equipage look small, too small for the three people in it.

The colonel, though now retired from his command, had still the feelings of a superior officer, and resented being outshone by his juniors even when he could not call them his subalterns.

The Seafords were young, and, so to speak, newly arrived, while he had fallen back upon family acres—yet they lived in a style to which he, with his large family, could not aspire, and what was more, lived independently of his opinion or countenance.

It was, of course, the wife's doing. Willie was a nonentity so far as the neighbourhood was concerned—"Though I am told he is a good enough business man," the old soldier would observe, chin in air. *That* was outside his province, and he washed his hands of any knowledge of or concern in it.

But he held that socially Mr. Seaford was of no account, and concentrated upon Olivia his mental scowl.

To see her faultless form, faultlessly arrayed, reclining at ease with space and to spare all round, while he had to be tucked in beside his wife's somewhat ample proportions, with his legs anywhere, suffering cramp at intervals, was a grievance in itself, and Kitty's radiant countenance aggravated the grievance. "Can't stand that woman," he muttered sourly, as the barouche whirled on in front.

"Dear me, I was thinking how pretty she looked!" responded Lady Fanny, innocently, "and here's Kitty thinks there is no one like Olivia Seaford in the world."

"Kitty's a little fool. Sit straight, child, and do, for Heaven's sake, give me room to spread my toes *somewhere*;" and the luckless man, hot and tortured, drew up a leg by the knee, while Kitty edged off a few inches and invaded her more accommodating parent on the other side.

"Mrs. Seaford might have taken you in beside her and never known you were there, but catch her! That kind of fine lady is the most selfish creature on earth," pronounced Colonel Thatcher, fixing a glaring eye on the flushed, emotional young face opposite, whence he expected protestation.

Kitty, however, pressed her lips silently together. She would not profane Olivia's name by having it bandied about in a quarrelsome discussion.

"So you can't stick up for your friend, eh?" gibed

her father. "She must be pretty bad if you haven't a word to say in her defence."

"Now, now, my dear," interposed his wife. "Now you are really too severe. I daresay Olivia never thought of it. She is generally in the clouds; and coming upon us suddenly in a country road—besides, she may not be going our way."

"She must go our way for the next couple of miles. That great turn-out of hers can't get along a lane at this scratchy season; and if she is taking the round by Hubley Bottom, as I don't doubt she is, she passes our very door."

"She would not think of it," murmured Lady Fanny. "Olivia was never brought up to think of other people."

"A proper friend for your daughter!"

But at this Kitty spoke at last. "If I could call her my friend it would be the proudest day of my life,—it would, and you may say what you please, father; but as it is, it's—it's nonsense. Friends are equals—but Olivia——"

"Well? Olivia? Go on," cried he, with a provoking laugh. "Let's have it out; in what is your precious Olivia different from other people?"

"In what is she like them?" cried Kitty, inflamed. "If you don't see, and can't see for yourself——"

"I don't and I can't—except that she is a fantastic creature who gives herself airs even to us who have known her from childhood."

"Mother, *is* that true? *Is* that fair? Mother, do speak. You know Olivia, and does she ever—I never heard anything so unjust;" Kitty's voice shook, and indignant tears welled to her eyes. "You might stand up for her," she adjured passionately.

Whereat Colonel Thatcher laughed. "You will not get your mother to back you up this time," quoth he,

maliciously. "Shall I tell you what she said to me the other day? That she was so held at arms' length whenever she went to The Willow House that she hardly knew how to go on calling there. Aye, she did, she said that. Those were her very words. Ask her. She can't deny them."

"You know, Kitty, I have been twice turned from the door when I could actually see Olivia in her garden," allowed Lady Fanny. "And I did think it did seem a little strange, so well as I once knew her family."

"She hates callers. She gives orders that she is not 'At Home' to anybody these lovely summer afternoons," asseverated Kitty, eagerly. "It was not you, it was *any one* who came, who had to be stopped going in; because she says people will hunt her out, and they do so interfere with her beautiful, open-air life, the thing in the world she cares most about. It is horrible for her to be brought indoors, and made to sit in a stuffy room."

"My dear, I could have gone to her; I would not have brought her in. And Olivia's rooms are never stuffy."

"They are rooms; and what she loves is the free space outside, with only the trees and the flowers and the birds singing."

"Yes, well, we all love those. I think none of us care to be immured within walls in weather like this. I am a country body myself," said Lady Fanny, placidly; "and I quite sympathise with Olivia's tastes; I should have gladly joined her and made my call among her pretty flower-beds."

"But then she would have had to sit and talk to you. She could not have gone on with her raking and watering."

"Well, no, she could hardly have done that," Lady

Fanny laughed. "Still it would not perhaps have been much to give up, a few minutes to an old friend."

"Mother, I told you it wasn't *you*. Olivia never says a word against *you*, only if she were to open her doors for one she would have to do it for all, and there would be an end of all her comfort. She prizes her quiet hours and thoughts, her wanderings in the fields, and what she calls her 'Communings with Nature in all her moods' so highly that she thinks it would be absolutely wrong and wicked to allow them to be wrenched from her. Besides, it is not only the time that would be wasted, it is that her spirit would be ruffled."

"My dear Kitty, that is a little absurd—pardon me, but I must say it. Olivia lives too much in dreamland. Her life is made so very easy for her—always has been—that she has abundance of leisure wherein to cultivate her mind and pursue congenial occupations without permitting them entirely to engross her. I see a great deal to admire in Olivia; it is certainly unusual to find a young woman of her appearance, and with her talents and charm of manner, destitute of any desire for admiration, and content to lead the retired life she does. In these days when everybody wishes to be known and noticed, to have their names in the papers and their doings chronicled even if they do but open a bazaar, or visit a hospital, it argues a certain strength of character and refinement in Olivia Seaford that that sort of cheap publicity repels her. There is no doubt she could have it. She would only have to do as others do, and her most trifling acts would be recorded and magnified. But Olivia prefers higher and purer pleasures; the only question is——" Lady Fanny paused and Kitty struck in impetuously:—

"You do appreciate her, mother; and if you knew her better you would appreciate her still more."

"You haven't let your mother finish her sentence," quoth the colonel, dryly. He had fidgetted and snorted scornfully at intervals during the above, but he had not interrupted, having an inkling that in the end the fair lady against whom he bore such an animus would meet with her deserts at the speaker's hands: "She'll smash her yet," he murmured under his breath, and waited.

"I cannot but think Olivia's rapturous delight in solitude, and her absolute independence even of her husband's companionship, is a snare," pronounced Lady Fanny, with as much decision as she could bring herself to throw into the words. "She wants nothing of her fellow-creatures, and is impatient of the idea that they want anything of her. Well, we shall see; she is young, and the realities of life so far have hardly touched her. She may yet emerge from her trance."

"Trance? She is perfect as she is. Oh, I hope, I do hope she will never 'Emerge' as you call it, mother, 'Sink down' as I should call it, into a dull, ordinary woman—but no, Olivia would never do that."

"Ha-ha-ha!" It was her father's laugh which brought Kitty up short, and vibrated cruelly through her frame; and so obvious was her pain that even he controlled himself in view of it, and also perhaps in answer to a warning pressure of his wife's hand. Albeit an irascible neighbour and masterful head of a house, the old soldier was affectionate as a family man, and invariably penitent directly a teasing fit was over. He had married late in life, after he had "Done with India" as he phrased it; and ever since there had been something of a strain with the four sons who speedily followed to be educated and started on various careers—to say nothing of the younger ones, who, headed by Kitty, were now making fresh demands on his by no means overflowing purse. He could get along—but he

could not get along without an effort and a grumble. Lady Fanny, who was many years younger than her husband, took things more easily—and that is all we need say of the Thatchers at present. Let us return to the colonel's passage-of-arms with his little girl sitting opposite.

“‘Pon my word, I shall engage you as my defender next time I am attacked behind my back,” quoth he, relaxing. “Hey, Kitty? I don’t like your friend, mind you, but still perhaps it was a bit rough on you to have her abused for what after all is her nature and can’t be helped. The mischief was done when she was a child, if it wasn’t altogether born in her. And as your mother says, she has her good points. She stays at home, and doesn’t bring hordes of flashy people down to it neither. She doesn’t gad, and flirt, and gamble. That’s something. I daresay if she had a dozen children—but stop a bit,” a frown arising, “the woman’s got a husband, and a deuced good husband. There’s not a better fellow going in his own way than Willie Seaford; yet people do say, you know——”

“What?” burst like a rocket from Kitty’s lips.

“That she treats him as if he were the dirt of the earth,” rejoined the colonel, coolly. “That he is made to wait on her hand and foot; to stand between her and every disagreeable, ward off every nuisance, make excuses for her, tell lies for her——”

“Here we are at the gate, John.”

The little white gate which bounded her modest drive, and which must needs be opened by one of themselves, there being no lodge, was never a more welcome sight to Lady Fanny than at the present moment. Her husband’s voice was rising; his softened attitude towards Olivia Seaford had melted away; and in another second he and Kitty would be at each other’s throats

again. She briskly drew off his knees the linen dust-wrap, and almost pushed him out of the carriage.

"Bless me, I'm as stiff as a pikestaff." The luckless gentleman had to rub the calves of his legs with expressive "Ugh-ughs" of only partial relief ere he could hobble to the gate, and after that he called for his stick, which was found beneath Kitty's seat, and would not get in again. The danger was past, and Lady Fanny blessed the gate afresh in her heart.

But Kitty sat swelling with anger and mortification. Not being a modern girl in the accepted sense of the word, she could not, perhaps she would not if she could, have reduced her parents to absolute subjection—but battle with them she would and did. To her view they knew so little; were so narrow and prejudiced; and although very good and kind and all that, were so terribly out-of-date, that it was only by fighting every inch of the ground that she could make head at all against the tiresome stupidity of her life. Olivia Seaford had gradually stolen into it, effulgent as a star; a glorious, beauteous object, whose beams shed a halo over her commonest surroundings, and transformed the most ordinary events which came within their radius.

For some years she worshipped silently and from afar, no one suspecting her secret.

It was enough to catch distant glimpses of her idol, to hear of her, to picture her, to imagine scenes in which Olivia moved and talked, her lips dropping pearls like those of the fairy princess of old. She would robe her princess in ideal garments—now blue, now pink—till, learning one day from a casual observation that Mrs. Seaford generally dressed in white, all at once everything but white seemed a desecration.

She read books that she fancied Olivia might be reading. She never undertook a new departure nor

engaged in a new pursuit without wondering in what light the other would have looked upon it. Things became interesting or uninteresting, of worth or worthless, according to the light she saw them in through Olivia's eyes.

And, strange to say, the being thus created in the little girl's imagination was up to a certain point not unlike the real Olivia. When by-and-by there came a first meeting, an actual meeting in which the tremulous, palpitating Kitty was a recognised individual (she never forgot the first few words in which she was addressed, nor the smile which was her very own), the foolish little thing did not, we are glad to think, receive a shock.

She might so easily have done so, extravagance having run riot in her brain,—but Olivia was in a happy mood, and therefore at her best. Perhaps the worship in Kitty's adoring eyes touched her. At all events it did not annoy her, and the poor little hungry soul was satisfied.

She was more than satisfied; thenceforth she despised her own creation, and exalted this veritable, tangible goddess to a still higher plane than the former had occupied. By sheer persistency she forced her way to Olivia's feet and grovelled there—while Olivia, half amused and possibly flattered, too, tolerated the infliction. After all, a child was not a boresome woman. She let Kitty come to the house and made her useful.

Often, it is true, the intruder was kept at work in a distant corner of the garden, whence she could only issue at intervals to submit an inquiry or perplexity—but she was allowed to be there; she could hear the grating of Olivia's hoe, or her clear voice calling to the gardeners; she could catch glimpses

of Olivia's hat above the bushes; she toiled contentedly.

And Olivia had tied with her own hands one of her own aprons round Kitty's waist, and lent her the very gloves she herself had worn; also selected her tools and shown her how to use them—it was enough.

When Kitty had to go home at the close of the afternoon she would have a few minutes of unalloyed bliss ere she left; for then her task-mistress, perhaps with a twinge of conscience at sight of the poor girl's heated face and burnt hands, would praise her work kindly, and kiss her good-bye with a cheerful, affectionate air.

Poor Kitty little suspected that some of its warmth was due to a sense of relief that the visit was over and need not to be repeated for another week or so.

Once Kitty hinted at coming oftener, but this was met adroitly.

"No, no, we must not think of that," quoth her friend, smiling. "You see, Kitty, we must not make *too* great a difference between you and others, and I do not want any others. I could not bear them," cried Olivia, frankly. "I am only just able to bear you." And to be thus borne seemed so wonderful and so adorable that the fortunate young person thus distinguished departed treading on air.

If she had heard Olivia's sigh as Wednesday came round again! "How the weeks do fly!" Then Mrs. Seaford would look about impatiently, and if a cloud were in the sky she would predict rain. Surely the Thatchers would be weatherwise enough to stop Kitty's coming in a rain-storm?

But, though it literally pelted once, in rushed Kitty, radiant.

"I got off before it began. I saw it coming on,

and escaped by the back-door. And oh, Olivia, I am so glad you live near the high road, because father and mother would never let me walk here alone if I had to come by the lanes"—and the speaker gazed at Olivia with glad, triumphant eyes, secure of sympathy.

Olivia felt a pang of compunction. "Do you really care so much to come, Kitty?"

"Oh!" said Kitty.

"You don't mind getting wet?"

"I mind nothing if I may only be with *you*." She caught Olivia's hand and kissed it. Olivia rather wished she wouldn't.

What on earth was she to do with Kitty confined indoors? As it happened, she had a special use for that wet day, and would not have minded for once foregoing her outdoor occupations,—so that the presence of a third person, and a third person who would not be shaken off, was particularly irksome.

When engaged in reading or music, Olivia liked to be alone in the room, and the feeling had grown upon her to such an extent that, however silent or unobtrusive the occupant of a chair or sofa might be, there was a sense of restraint if her solitude were invaded.

Still she could have forgotten Kitty Thatcher, given her a piece of needlework to go on with, or some china to wash—Kitty had shown herself handy in washing china, and the Seafords had some so valuable that servants were not allowed to touch it—if Olivia had only desired to abstract her thoughts in an ordinary way. The tiresomeness of it was that no ordinary abstraction would suffice for the task she had in hand; yet to put it aside to a more convenient season was heartbreaking. Olivia was writing a book.

Not a word of her doing so had been whispered in mortal ear; it would have been too terrible to tell

Willie, who would have burst out with "How's the book getting on?" before the servants, or even confided in his friends, "My wife is turning author"—and if not to Willie—Willie who simply absorbed her with all his pores open—then to nobody. Willie was my heroine's safety valve, and could be trusted implicitly with those sentiments and emotions of which the greater part of Olivia's life was made up—but impregnated with an astounding fact, and a fact to be proud of, he would be in a dangerous state of combustion; she durst not risk it.

The precious manuscript therefore, which was now the apple of Olivia's eye, dwelt fast under lock and key, and only saw the light when every footfall ceased in the house. Olivia could not write while the servants were about; she could not write till after the daily tradespeople had been and gone—(her morning room overlooked the back entrance); she could not write if the mowing machine came too near upon the lawn, or the gravel were being raked round the corner of the house—naturally she could not write if Kitty Thatcher were in the drawing-room washing china or sewing embroidery.

And she felt in the vein, too. Looking out upon the deliciously dripping trees and the delicate tangle of colour below, inhaling the fresh sweetness of a thousand odours wafted in through the open window, she told herself that this was an inspired occasion—and *that* just at the moment when a figure appeared in the avenue! Olivia never swore—good Heavens, no—but she banged down the lid of her bureau, and her face as she did so was not pleasant to look upon.

Then Kitty spun into the room breathless, and there was, as we have said, a spasm of compunction at the sight of her sparkling, glowing countenance.

But all too soon it faded, and Olivia was herself again. Her morning gone! Her beautiful morning of silence and solitude! And Kitty had been told, distinctly told, never to come before three o'clock!

To be sure, an exception had been made for this Wednesday, because Kitty's coming was to be an excuse for putting off more troublesome visitors who had offered to run down from town and spend the day at The Willow House, and Willie, man-like, had seen no reason why they shouldn't.

Olivia had swiftly consolidated her defence. She had secured the enraptured Kitty, regretted to the town contingent that she would be engaged with other guests that day, and again, on the intervention of the elements, mentally disposed of the whole matter.

So that now she was both angry and aggrieved.

It was unendurable that an absurd little Kitty Thatcher, who probably did not know what to do with her time and was a nuisance at home like other newly emancipated schoolgirls, should be suffered to throw the burden of her own idleness on to other people's shoulders. It was too bad of Lady Fanny to permit it. In her heat Olivia flung accusations right and left, regardless of the fact that Kitty had owned in confidence, and not without triumph, that her mother's consent to the weekly meeting had been reluctantly won.

Olivia, when she first heard this, had been rather pleased. So her youthful adorer had had to fight for what she prized so highly! There was some spirit in that, some enthusiasm; and she appreciated enthusiasm, and was not, as has been said, above being flattered.

But now Kitty and Kitty's people were all alike in her black books, and it was with difficulty that she could maintain a decent appearance. What was she to

do? How was she to dispose of her incubus? Her eyes suddenly brightened.

"You are the dearest little thing. I wonder now"—murmured she thoughtfully.

Kitty, who was busy disrobing, paused and looked round. A blast of rain spattered on the window-panes, but Olivia turned her back on them resolutely.

"Are you afraid of catching cold?" she ventured.

Kitty laughed. Catch cold? She never caught cold; she looked eagerly for more.

"I am, rather," said Olivia calmly; "and it is such a pity, for there is a lot to do in one of the greenhouses. Jenkyns and the men are bedding out, and all the places that they leave empty by carrying off the boxes of little green things have to be filled up. I never allow *them* to rearrange the greenhouses, but if *you*——"

"Oh, Olivia, could you really trust me?"

In five minutes she was hustled off. The greenhouses lay at the far end of the garden; and once installed, with instructions that took the form of commands, to stay at her post, and on no account run to and fro in the rain for any purpose whatever, Kitty was safely imprisoned for the morning. The importance of her mission was impressed upon her—it is to be hoped it satisfied her.

At all events Olivia was now free once more to "Belong to herself"—a favourite phrase, and could sit down to her desk and draw forth the vellum-bound volume, with its blank sheets of a particular kind, the only kind she could write upon, which Willie had hunted out and which had nearly had to be made on purpose, so difficult to please was his liege lady.

"You know, Willie, unless I have the exact materials to suit me I can't do anything," explained Olivia—though Willie was not to know to what the "Doing" referred,

and had indeed no curiosity on the subject. Olivia wanted paper, and wanted some of it bound into a book in a certain way,—and it was his business to procure the paper and have the book made, and that was all about it.

She now took out a gold pencil-case of an antique pattern, with a jewel on the top; and having altered a vase of flowers so that its best blossoms came into the line of her vision, and drawn therefrom a spray of jessamine to smell at intervals, her preparations were complete.

Perhaps the book did not progress very fast. Authors who are fastidious about the shape of their pencil, the style of their paper, and the objects their eyes rest upon when in fine frenzy rolling, are seldom rapid workers—but Olivia knew that she could number some of the great ones of the earth among her co-faddists, and reflected happily and at leisure on such of their idiosyncrasies as she could call to mind which jumped with her own.

She had not a doubt that she was going to write a great, little book.

She pleased herself mightily with the paradox.

There would be a few pages and a few words on each page—but much thought, much originality and beauty, a vast amount of feeling and discernment; there would be poetry and perception—love of Nature and love of Art—wisdom, knowledge, grace, gaiety, seriousness, sweetness in *The Peculiar Book*, by O. S.—which was, if not to discover a new world in literature, at least to open up a hitherto untrodden by-path.

“For though, of course, there have been books, the most delightful books, written about woods and flowers and gardens,” reflected she (indeed she had, as may be guessed, herself saturated with these), “mine will be quite different. I shall strike out an entirely new line. I shall put down just what *I* think and what *I* feel, and

of course that can't be what other people have thought and felt. It will be recognised at once that here is a writer who dares to be herself—which I always have dared and shall dare," continued Olivia, modestly, "—whatever odium it brings me into with the ordinary crowd whose opinion poor Willie thinks so much about."

"And as the Brothertons and Thatchers and the rest are always wondering what I do to amuse myself, and how I pass my time while so much alone, they will now be able to satisfy their inquisitiveness," further cogitated she. "That is, if they are able to understand what it is all about—for I doubt if they will"—here she laughed—"but, at any rate, I offer them the chance." And for full ten minutes she mused, smiling and picturing the sensation to be made in the neighbourhood when *The Peculiar Book*, by O. S., should burst like a bomb in its midst.

The advisability of giving her full name or only its initials had occupied her mind much at the start, but that crucial point was now settled. "O. S." would conceal nothing. Of course, her identity would be discovered; while at the same time no one would presume to accost her on the subject, nor refer to it in her presence.

"And I think the critics should be given a hint about this," pondered she, drawing circles with a meditative pencil. "It would never do for them to be calling me 'Mrs. Seaford' and referring to my home and my life, and the influences that have induced my remarkable book. Willie must go to the different newspaper offices and beg as a favour that they will respect my desire to remain unknown. If Willie is civil and sends in his card, they will be sure to treat him nicely. Or he could ask my publisher—perhaps that would be best. When we have decided upon a publisher, I can write him a little note about it."

And then she fell to wondering who the publisher should be, which opened up a large field for speculation, so that an hour or more passed, and the gold pencil-case still wandered idly about, and Olivia still smelt the jessamine and gazed through the windows at the dripping world of green outside happily, but it is to be feared with less and less inclination to do more than thus sit and dream.

“That tiresome girl upset me. I know I had something to write,” cried she at last. “It was all in my head last night; and if I could have sat down *then*—but of course poor Willie must needs come stamping in full of other things, just when the wind was filling my sails—and once put off, it is so hard to get back what one has lost. Now perhaps it is gone for ever,” she moaned fretfully; “I am sure it has, for I *can’t* remember—I *can’t* think—oh, whatever is that strange man doing in my garden?” suddenly she started up. “Come to interrupt Jenkyns and take him off his work! How tiresome, how inconsiderate! Yes, there they go walking off together, and of course the others will slacken directly Jenkyns turns his back. I shall stand in the window”—suiting the action to the words—“and if they see me—if only they would look this way, idle creatures”—impatiently—“stopping altogether, I declare! And lighting their pipes! Oh, it *can’t* be twelve o’clock?”—hastily stepping back to glance at a clock which the next moment rang out the hour. “Oh, dear, my beautiful morning that I delivered out of the claws of the Rushingtons is slipping away and I have got nothing done!”—and she resolutely reseated herself, pencil in hand.

In the end a few paragraphs, much rewritten and reconstructed, did actually get transferred to the page, and Olivia stretched herself and clasped her hands at

the back of her neck with the air of a weary labourer to whom rest is sweet. "Quality is everything, quantity is nothing," reflected she, complacently; "I had rather put down one word that was the right word than a host of meaningless phrases."

"There, that will do for to-day," she concluded, after reading over and over again, and here and there altering a sentence. "I have really got on very well, all things considered; and if I could only write out of doors, in some little secret nook, with the sound of the brook babbling among its rushes—yes, I will, to-morrow I will do that. I will choose the spot to-day if the rain stops. Kitty may go with me; she will suspect nothing, and I can cast my eyes about. Then I might have a little shed built, Jenkyns would run me up one in no time, with a table and a box—a box with a lock and key—I wonder I did not think of that before!" And Olivia, all animation, paced the room, considering. "I wonder how I could think of sitting down prosaically to write at a desk when all the lovely world without was beckoning. And of course ideas would come faster then; they would come in a rush, come of themselves. As I am going to write about my garden, it is my garden that must surround and inspire me. I never feel so gay and buoyant elsewhere. How the sweet peas will smell after this rain, and so will the pine woods! Kitty and I must go into the pine woods, for there is the sun—oh, and there is Kitty"—and there was a breath of something not quite exultation in the last words; nevertheless, Olivia, after a few moments, called to the advancing figure gaily. She was uplifted by the new idea, and Kitty reaped the benefit.

CHAPTER III.

THE HOSTESS.

THAT Olivia considered the Rushingtons and the horrible infliction of a whole-day visit from them disposed of, argued that Olivia did not know Mrs. Rushington. It was a case of Greek meeting Greek—and had we been asked which Greek to back we are by no means sure we should have said Olivia.

Olivia was young—Mrs. Rushington was an old, old hand. When she had an end to gain, she discovered an amount of strategical acumen worthy of a Bismarck, and an indifference to obstacles creditable in a Hannibal.

Rebuffs she took as thistle-blows; they floated over her and past her, and stuck nowhere.

In fine, her own point of view so entirely absorbed this robust matron's attention, and so dwarfed that of friends and enemies alike, that no other existed for her.

She had on the present occasion determined to spend a day at The Willow House—not indeed for the pleasure of Olivia's company, nor for any benefit to be immediately attained, but with an object in her eye which the following conversation may serve to elucidate.

The Rushingtons were at breakfast in their London house, and busy with the morning post, which in June was naturally a full one.

“So you are not going to the country to-day, hey?” quoth Mr. Rushington, looking up the table. “Put off, are you?”

"And we cannot go to-morrow, but on Friday we might," returned his wife, considering.

"Friday? Friday is ever so full," interposed a daughter in some surprise. "How can we possibly go on Friday, when we have——"

"Nothing particular." Mrs. Rushington had whipped a note-book from her pocket, and was prepared with her answer. "No, nothing that can't be evaded. Only a few teas, and the Grimwoods' dance, which none of you care about. I shall tell Olivia to expect us on Friday."

"I suppose it is worth the fag?" Mr. Rushington sipped his coffee, and glanced at his wife over the cup. "It is an hour each way—and two hours of train in this sweltering weather——"

"A whole delightful country day would make up for it. Or——" The speaker paused and smiled cunningly. "I have an idea. Did you not say," she turned to Phyllis, the eldest of the girls, who was more or less in her confidence, and now sat, meekly awaiting developments; "I think you heard somehow that the Lascocks do not use their motor every day, that the girls told you they were often glad of an excuse not to go out in it. I know I understood something of the kind."

"But we couldn't ask for it," said Amy, quickly. Amy inherited her mother's decision of character. "Such a thing is *never* done. No one dreams of asking for other people's motors, if you mean that."

"We could let them know about our expedition, and they might offer. They would be almost sure to offer. I could go round and see Mrs. Lascock about the tickets for that ball and——"

"I don't see how you could do it. Besides," added Amy, rapidly, "I am nearly sure I heard Muriel say they had arranged something for Friday."

"Another day would do; I need not fix with Olivia till after I have been to Eaton Square. I can run round this morning, and write by the afternoon post."

"I doubt if you will manage it. People aren't so keen to lend their motors," observed Mr. Rushington, who took the interest of an idle man in trivial matters. "Remember, you will have to tip the chauffeur, if you go. It won't cost you much less than the train would."

"It would be far pleasanter. Dear Algy would enjoy the motor."

"Are you taking *him*? What on earth are you taking *Algy* for?" In his amazement, Algy's father stopped eating, and stared at his wife with a surprise that would have disconcerted most people, but which only elicited an easy response accompanied by a smile.

"Oh, yes, my dear, we are taking Algy. In fact, between ourselves, it is mainly on Algy's account we go."

"Mother hopes the Seafords may ask him to stay on"—Phyllis nodded at her other parent—"and it would certainly be a good thing if they did. But, mother," turning to her, "do you suppose they would ever think of it? I shouldn't say Olivia Seaford was the person to care about hampering herself with an invalid, unless he were an interesting one, a young man from the front, or some one of that kind. But poor Algy, you know!"

"Algy is a very dear boy," said Mrs. Rushington, quickly.

"Of course he is, but"—Amy looked hard at her mother—"the very dear boy of one's own family may not be exactly—I mean, we cannot expect Olivia Seaford to give herself up to amusing and petting him as we do."

"Not if she did not know the dear fellow, of course. But surely if she saw him and he interested her—and he does so love the country, he would be so happy there"—into Mrs. Rushington's usually sharp, decisive tones there stole an intonation that was seldom if ever heard in connection with any one but her only son, and her hard eyes turned wistfully towards one and another of the assembled family in a manner that made them interchange glances—"it came to me all at once," she murmured, "and it really seemed an inspiration."

"Of course, if it *could* be done," hesitated Phyllis.

"But it *can't*," decided her sister.

"Let your mother try," was their father's ultimatum. And its wisdom was apparent a couple of hours later, when back came Mrs. Rushington from her mission radiant.

"It is all arranged," she announced triumphantly. "There was no difficulty whatever about it. We are to have the motor for the day—it was quite a mistake your supposing they had anything fixed for Friday, Amy—and you and Phyllis can both go, as well as Algy and me."

"Splendid. Mother, you are really splendid."

Phyllis was always a satisfactory person to make an announcement to, but Amy looked grave.

"A party like that would be rather a bolt from the blue. I don't see that we could descend on Olivia in such force, especially if we are to go early," objected she. "Of course, it would be very nice for *us*. Well, perhaps it might be managed! We can see what she says"—for the expedition sounded tempting, and the principal difficulty having been so readily overcome it seemed stupid to make a fuss about minor ones. "After all, we shouldn't want any entertaining," continued Amy, addressing her sister as they were left

alone, Mrs. Rushington having joyfully departed to inform Algy in his little room upstairs of the treat in store—"if Algy were not with us, we need only stay an hour or so; the fun would be in the run there and back—but if he goes——"

"He ought to go, if he can. It is rather a long way, but if he has a good rest there, I daresay it won't be too much for him. Anyhow, as it is on his account mother has planned the whole thing, we may be sure he is going," said Phyllis, "and if mother is as clever with Olivia as she has been with the Lascocks, it would really be splendid for Algy. He has been having very bad nights lately." And again, on her face and on her sister's appeared that softened expression which made even acquaintances say there was something rather beautiful in the affection of the Rushington family for the poor crippled lad who could never be anything but a burden on their hands.

Mentally, Algy was all right, indeed rather above the average in natural ability, but ill-health had interfered with his education, and at sixteen he was in many respects still a child.

That he was a lovable child has already been made plain. He was, in fact, the darling of the house, and its one tender spot.

But for that pale face and those dark-ringed eyes which turned so eagerly to the opening of the door—but for that quiet room, where there was always leisure, and interest, and sympathy for every one who could spare a moment from the busy outer world, the Rushingtons would have been considerably worse than they were. They were self-seeking, pleasure-loving, elbowing, pushing people, but they would each and all give up something for Algy. Algy did not know that his father was a brainless idler who would never have had wits to

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make the money left him by his father, the tradesman, yet whose contemptible aim in life it was to keep from others the knowledge that it had so come. Algy liked to hear the news of the day, which Mr. Rushington brought in from his club, and gratefully accepted pictorial and other papers, which the latter made a solemn business of collecting for him. "I have an invalid boy who likes these sort of things, so I am always glad to hear of a really good number," was a familiar beginning, on the strength of which "That infernal little bore Rushington" could invade the armchair of some good-natured great man and worry half an hour's conversation of him.

But Algy only thought how kind and entertaining his father was; and when he went away—for he seldom stayed long—there were the papers, or there was a toy from the streets. Had the boy known, it really did cost his parent an effort to stop and buy a penny toy on the pavement; and perhaps Froggy Rushington might not have done so twice, but that it chanced a noble lord was passing and touched his shoulder kindly: "Something for your poor lad at home, eh, Rushington?" Rushington never having been looked at in so friendly a fashion before, took heart of grace and purchased toys at intervals.

Algy's mother and sisters could also on occasion violate their sensibilities on his behalf. The girls would provide him with company which was obviously accorded with reluctance.

Young men are not, as a rule, selfish towards each other in illness, but while they will not grudge an hour bestowed on a disabled comrade who at other times is one of themselves, they shrink from, and it is to be feared evade, if possible, the sick-room of a sufferer who is never well, never strong and hearty, and never likely to become so.

E ENLIGHTENMENT OF OLIVIA

Relations as well as friends were difficult to lure upstairs in the Rushingtons' house; and it said something for Amy and Phyllis Rushington that they pursued unflinchingly their purpose and from time to time provided their brother with a visitor whom they knew would have escaped if he could. "But poor Algy will never know," they told each other, and for Algy's sake endured the odium depicted on the countenances of dancing partners who vowed defection to themselves thenceforth.

Algy's mother went still further—she struggled and stole for her son. "Stole" is perhaps rather a strong word, but what do you call pocketing sweetmeats and abstracting sugar ornaments from other people's tables, to say nothing of that night on which the wind blowing back her cloak while Mrs. Rushington was being seen to her carriage, her bare arms were revealed hanging with clusters of grapes, designed to regale some one who had not been at the supper-table?

It was certainly an ugly moment, and the lady's cheeks burnt despite her ready apology. "I know, dear Sir Charles, you would like my poor sick boy to have his share of your bounty;" she could press his arm, and smile into his astonished face, but she never told a soul, and Algy ate his grapes in peace. When no further invitations came from Sir Charles's house, Mrs. Rushington wondered audibly with the rest, and took her punishment like a Spartan.

And now she was prepared to face any ordeal if only Olivia Seaford would succumb in the long run, and Algy be installed at The Willow House to revel for awhile in June sunshine and country air.

"Have you had any reply from Olivia?" inquired Phyllis on the following evening. "She could have answered by to-night."

"There seems to be nothing here," replied her mother, sorting out letters on the hall table.

"We can't go if she doesn't write," observed Amy, who was also present. "Olivia is casual, but she might surely have sent a postcard."

Mrs. Rushington was silent.

"There is sure to be one in the morning," said Phyllis, cheerfully. "What time is the motor to be here?"—looking at her mother.

"Half-past ten. We shall take two hours, or perhaps rather more, to get down"—but here the speaker was interrupted.

"Half-past ten! What on earth is the good of rushing us off at that hour?" cried Amy, shrilly. "And we shan't be in our beds till three; half-past eleven would be soon enough, even if it does take two hours; we only want to be at the Seafords for luncheon."

"It would be more polite to arrive a little before. They might want to—to add a little"—Mrs. Rushington stammered, despite herself—"the fact is, girls, that it struck me how very unfortunate it might be if, after securing the motor and all——"

"What do you mean by 'And all'?"—but Amy's interposition was promptly disposed of.

"I mean the weather. To-morrow is sure to be warm and fine like to-day, and if we did not go to-morrow, when we have actually got the motor, and Algy is so well and looking forward to it, and the weather——"

"Oh, the weather! Do you mean that Olivia has refused us again?"—and both girls looked impatiently at their mother, but their supposition was so much worse than the reality that Mrs. Rushington plucked up courage.

"No, no. No, indeed; nothing of the sort. I feel sure Olivia will be delighted; it is only that—that—"

what I propose to do is to appear *impromptu*. To say that we have run down on the chance——”

“Without letting her know!”

“There is nothing in that. The Seafords are rich people, and there is sure to be plenty of food in the house. The only thing required is to give the servants time to lay the table, and——”

“Mother, Olivia will be furious.”

“Nonsense, nonsense; you girls never understand. You will see how easily the thing works out; it only requires a little tact and *savoir-faire*. If Olivia were given time to think about it she would very likely be alarmed, I grant you, and perhaps her cook would make a fuss; that is why I don't wire; the household would be upset making preparations,—but if we just appear on the scene——”

“We can't. We can't treat Olivia so. We don't know her well enough,” cried Amy, vehemently. “And besides, she is not at all that sort of woman. I always think Olivia Seaford a most formidable being. She has a way of keeping one at a distance——”

“My dear, how absurd. Olivia is never rude. She has most pleasant manners—not exactly of the hail-fellow-well-met order——”

“No, indeed, not exactly that.” Amy laughed expressively.

“Oh, I daresay she won't mind us,” intervened Phyllis, who was of a more pliant disposition. “Not if we take her the right way. But, mother, you *will* say we only came on the chance? And you *will* go in first by yourself, and not have us all unloading at the door before you can explain? It would be too awful, with Algy to be helped out too! And if Olivia came upon us before you——”

“I'll manage, never fear,” and Mrs. Rushington

noded reassurance, relieved, if the truth were known, to have got through the scene better than she had expected. "And whatever you do, don't say a word to Algy. The poor boy would be in tortures if he knew; he is so sensitive, so afraid of being a nuisance—*mind*, both of you, not a syllable to him"—and she gathered up her fan and gloves and prepared to set forth, the above having taken place in the hall when waiting for the carriage, which now came round to carry the party to the ball which had caused Amy to regard the morrow's early start with such disfavour.

"After all, it will freshen us up, if we feel, as we generally do, hot-coppery," the latter now conceded; "and I suppose we need not come down till the thing is at the door."

And as the thing was late, and themselves later still, in getting together, the start which had been arranged for half-past ten o'clock did not actually come off till some minutes after eleven; so that it was perilously near Olivia's luncheon hour when a strange sound was heard within the precincts of The Willow House.

Olivia had passed a happy morning betwixt congenial toil and blissful repose; and was now wending her way homewards, owing to a healthy hunger, and even casting a glance through the open window of the dining-room as she passed to see if the table were already prepared.

Her repast would consist of light and dainty fare. She was a little particular about it; but her cook knew so exactly what would please, that the few select dishes were sure to be suited to the taste of the atmosphere and the probable fancy of her mistress. Solid roasts and boiled meats were kept for the master's dinner.

Conceive then the sensations caused alike below and above stairs by the hoot of a motor-car within a few yards of the front door, and the sight of the said motor

drawing up there, full of people, at the very moment when that process known as dishing-up was going on in the kitchen. Thomas, from the passage window, first espied the invaders; and to Thomas alone of all concerned it conveyed no pang. His life was a dull one, and excitement in any shape welcome.

But when Mrs. Cook learnt that a party of three ladies and a gentleman had been ushered into the drawing-room, and that she would further have to provide for a London man in the servants' hall, her consternation and wrath made Thomas take speedy refuge in his pantry, whence with gleeful bustle he presently emerged armed with knives, forks, and glasses, for the extra places required on the dining-table.

"I can't, and I shan't," reiterated the kitchen dignitary; but in the end she had to go to her larder; while with equal passion Olivia in her bedroom protested, and equally had to yield to overwhelming circumstances, and descend.

"Dear Olivia, will you ever forgive us?" It was Mrs. Rushington who, with a forced beam on her countenance, rustled forward, stretching out both hands. "Here we are—and so wretchedly, miserably ashamed of ourselves! We meant to have been here an hour ago; and then if you could not have us, or were away from home, or anything, we should have flown off to some little inn to satisfy the cravings of nature. But you are here, you dear, delightful creature, and I know you won't——"

She was a bold woman to know it. For a moment Olivia did actually contemplate the step her interlocutor was so confident she would not take, but conventional manners prevailed.

"You are just in time for luncheon," said she, shaking hands all round—(but she never said she was glad

of it, Amy took note)—“and I am sure you must be famishing. You must have made a very early start?”

“But you must not make any difference for us, now, will you?” adjured Mrs. Rushington, getting easily into her stride as the first somewhat stiff fence had been surmounted without a breakdown. “We can eat anything, you know; anything. Bread and cheese if there is nothing else in the house.”

“We shall not quite be reduced to that,” Olivia smiled coldly; “but my small meal would hardly suffice for four other people, so perhaps you had better come upstairs and get clean while——”

“But you are sure we shan’t put out your cook? It is so *sweet* of you to take us like this. Yes, really, it will be rather nice to get clean;” Mrs. Rushington essayed a laugh which she meant to be gay, but which had rather a meretricious effect. “Girls,” she turned to her daughters, “you won’t be sorry to see a little hot water, will you? The dust on the roads was terrible, Olivia. By the way, I did not explain how it came about that we took you by storm. We had the unexpected offer of the Lascoks’ motor. What?”

“I was going to suggest that your son,” said Olivia, looking at him with the first sign of kindness she had yet evinced, “should be taken charge of by——” but here she paused. Thomas was of course busy in the dining-room, and the page-boy, as it happened, had been despatched on an errand.

“Let me look after Algy,” said Phyllis, stepping forward, and Algy’s eyes turned gratefully towards her. He shrank from strange attendants, and his thin face was now working with apprehension. “He is my especial boy,” continued Phyllis, and she and he were directed to a bath-room, where many kinds of taps and sponges prevailed.

"I say, she wasn't a bit glad to see us;" as soon as they were alone the boy's tongue was loosened. "It was beastly," continued he. "I thought we had been invited, till the last minute, when I heard you and Amy telling the mater to go in first, and make out a good story. Why wasn't I told? Oh, I wish we hadn't come,"—and his mouth quivered.

Phyllis, however, was reassuring. She could not indeed say much for Olivia's welcome, but she could promise Algy that he should be taken out of her way.

"You won't leave me with her? You won't all go off and leave me alone with her?" he entreated agonisingly.

No, Phyllis would give her solemn word of honour they would not do that. "For our own sakes, as well as for yours," laughed she. "We'll scuttle out of the way, you and Amy and I; and we'll get into the woods, those lovely pine-woods we saw coming along."

"That'll be jolly; you are sure we shall?"

"And mother can stay and palaver with Olivia."

"But I say, Phyllis, I do hope she won't look as black at us all the time as she did at first?"

"Of course she won't. She was only taken by surprise. Here, let me brush your hair; and now I'll fly along and find out Amy to pin up this tear"—exhibiting a rent in her muslin flounce—"and you wait about here till I come back to help you downstairs"—and Phyllis departed.

"I thought I had better go with him and talk away his fright a little," she confided to her sister. "He looked so scared. If only Olivia had been more genial, and I do think she might. Most people would have felt some kind of—she could see poor Algy was simply trembling all over."

"It was a mistake to bring him. He is sure to be

the worse for it. Mother might have known he couldn't stand four hours'—and I daresay it will be nearer five—motoring on a day like this. I know *I* am tired." Amy yawned and stretched herself. "Of course it won't be so bad going back in the cool of the evening, however."

"Do you suppose Olivia will keep us till the cool of the evening?" queried Phyllis, doubtfully.

"She must. She can't get rid of us. Algy could never go back before."

But Mrs. Rushington pinched her daughter's arm, when the subject was mooted presently. "Yes, that is the charm of a motor. One need never consider its powers. Horses must rest; and if we had come by train, we should have had to inflict ourselves on you, Olivia, till a train had the humanity to come to the rescue. But now we need not stay one fraction of a minute beyond the time you would like to keep us. Just say when we are to go——"

"Mother!" Both daughters tried to laugh, while Olivia affected not to hear.

"How deliciously this syringa smells!"—cried Phyllis, looking round for a diversion.

Olivia had approached Algy in the window; he was the only one of the party she did not regard with indignant aversion, and he was gazing into her garden with delight. Although startled by her voice at his elbow, its tones were so much more gentle and friendly than they had been, that he was able to endure a brief talk about flowers with equanimity.

And at last came luncheon. For her own credit's sake Mrs. Seaford's expensive chef would not send up a bad luncheon, and Thomas was bidden hold his tongue, and suppose she knew what she was about, when he suggested cold beef, and couldn't he wait till the company was seated before taking in the cutlets? The

cutlets were excellent, and the cold beef—a thing of horror in Olivia's eyes—looked attractive enough on the sideboard to those of Mrs. Rushington, who indeed went for it straight away, and, with a jest at her appetite, had two helpings. Olivia's delicate lunch, kidneys, which would have been ruined had they waited to be served with the rest, had been cleverly chopped into a savory; and Olivia, looking round with an odd curiosity to know what she would have had at her peaceful solitary meal, could not for the life of her divine.

There was a succulent salad of fresh young vegetables, and cool, curd-like rings of eggs. There was asparagus—a heaped-up dish which made the Rushingtons' mouths water; indeed, it was asparagus caught on the top of the wave as it were, for, seeing the arrival, Jenkyns, a good Jenkyns, left what he was doing and darted towards the beds, where with liberal hand he cut, and presently took a noble bunch into the kitchen. Asparagus is quickly boiled, and the whole repast was elevated by Jenkyns' promptitude.

A jelly which had been prepared for Willie's special delectation at night was, moreover, ruthlessly sacrificed to the present marauders—while the servants were denuded of their gooseberry puffs (at which Thomas looked blank enough, and "Serves him right" grimly reflected his culinary enemy, who had seen through Thomas and his pleasurable excitement over what was to her an outrage)—so that Mrs. Rushington had really some excuse for her enthusiastic laudations of dear Olivia's housekeeping when the luncheon table came into view.

Olivia herself felt soothed by the masterly dexterity of her ménage. Olivia was not above a feminine pride in it; it was her boast that everything went on oiled wheels at The Willow House—and, aware of this and mindful of their own interests, which would have been

endangered by any creakings and strainings of the machinery, the servants, who knew a snug and easy place when they found it, took care to preserve its mistress's peace of mind.

"You know, Willie, if we went in for entertaining and filling our spare rooms as some people do, we should never get along so comfortably," she had been overheard to say, and the cue thus given was played up to below stairs.

But on a desperate occasion, an occasion which was known to be resented as much by Mrs. Seaford as by the meanest of her scullions, they would not fail her, and even the coffee which was brought in presently, was all that coffee should be.

"Take it outside, Thomas. That is, if you think it would be pleasanter there?" Olivia turned civilly to her guests, and Mrs. Rushington, albeit she had had enough of "Outside," and was very comfortable in the shady room whose window awnings kept it cool, had to rise responsively from the armchair into which she had sunk, and feign a joyful acquiescence in the suggestion.

And now set in the long, weary afternoon. Obviously no help was to be had from the motor, whose repose in the stable-yard was complete, while the chauffeur could be seen starting on a round of exploration,—and the hapless Olivia, seated in the midst of her tormentors, now replete with good things and enjoying lassitude as only Londoners on an off-day can, was indeed an object for pity.

She was caught and caged. She could not suggest a drive to people who had already traversed thirty miles of road, and had the same on their return journey before them. She could not get up a game of lawn-tennis, or croquet, or bowls, for the very good reason that she possessed none of the weapons of war for anything of

the kind—added to which Amy and Phyllis, lolling lazily in low chairs, with gloves and hats on their knees, were plainly not bent on action or exercise, while Algy—it was only too plain that nothing could be done with Algy.

And yet it was on Algy that Olivia's eye rested. She could have taken the boy where she could not and would not take his mother and sisters. Her beloved garden, those secluded haunts out of sight and out of ken to any but the initiated few, should not be profaned by Mrs. Rushington's commonness and her daughters' silliness, but Algy might have understood; he was gazing upwards to where the tall leader of a Wellingtonia stood out black against the sky, lost to all besides; and Olivia, following his eyes, saw a wood-pigeon swaying on the leader, and heard it coo. She and Algy alone had ears for the soft, low note.

"And I say, what's that tree with the sun shining through its leaves?" inquired he, presently. "I never saw a tree like that, with yellow blossoms."

None of the rest had seen anything to notice in the grand old tulip-tree, which was a feature of the lawn and Olivia's special pride.

"May I pick a few leaves, please?" said Algy, respectfully.

Olivia almost called him "Dear," he looked so young and timid, and treated her with such deference. She sprang up to show him where the young leaves hung lowest, and when it appeared that he wanted to dry them as markers for his books, and that he had other kinds of markers, ferns and poppies, and beautiful thick cotton-rushes from Scotland, she found herself quite interested in selecting tender and transparent specimens off the tulip-tree, which Algy fingered lovingly and presently transferred to his pocket-book.

"I thought I might get something here," he confided, "but I didn't think it would be anything so beautiful as these."

"Just see, girls. I said the dear boy would make his way," breathed Mrs. Rushington aside, in accents of suppressed ecstasy. "Olivia is a little difficult for *us* to get on with, but she and Algy—oh, I should not wonder in the least if she were to invite him on. And he could stay just as he is; Mr. Seaford could lend him things till we sent down his own. If we sent them early to-morrow——"

But ere she could think out the subject, the two returned from the tulip-tree. "Now mind you press them to-night, directly you get home," Olivia was saying, and Mrs. Rushington's face fell.

Then dreariness set in again, till all of a sudden something occurred with a start to the dejected hostess which she wondered she had not thought of before. She would send for Kitty Thatcher.

A groom was riding slowly off from the stables, and in an instant he was arrested, a note was scribbled, and the writer returned to her guests—but this time with a certain relief in her heart. She had bidden the man ride quickly.

And it was well he did; the victoria was at Colonel Thatcher's door, and the ladies stood on the door-step attired for a garden-party.

But was a garden-party to stand in Kitty's way when wanted by Olivia? Never before had such an honour been accorded her, and she was impatient even of Lady Fanny's mild demur.

"*Of course* I must go," cried she. "Just think of it; those awful people she thought she had got rid of on Wednesday have descended like locusts upon her to-day. Established themselves there for the after-

noon, and poor Olivia doesn't know *what* to do with them."

"But, my dear——"

"Oh, don't stop me," cried Kitty frantically.

"What is it?" demanded the colonel, appearing from within.

When matters were explained to him: "Aye, aye, I daresay," said he, for a wonder not unsympathetic. "Just the way those impudent London gentry have of treating us poor country folk. I can fancy they would make Madam squirm. She finds out now who are the better."

"There you see, mother, I couldn't fail her; even father thinks I couldn't fail Olivia in her need."

"I never said so, miss. But I suppose," he turned to his wife, "she means it for a kind of civility, and as she seems to have taken Kitty up after her own fashion——"

"And you can be much more comfortable without me in the victoria," insinuated Kitty; "and as we are passing the Seafords' very door——"

She had the sense to sit quite silent after the order was given to stop at the gate of The Willow House, and furthermore not to let her father's legs have too much room.

"I shall be gone directly, and then you can stretch out in peace," she smiled and nodded at him; and she was out like a bird when the carriage stopped.

"What about picking you up on the way home?" cried the colonel. But Kitty shook her head, laughing. She would much, much rather walk. Also it would be cool by the time of her return.

"That means she'll stay as late as they'll have her. But I suppose it's all right? Drive on." And the speaker resettled himself luxuriously. "Since it pleases her, I suppose there's no harm in it, eh?"

“It will not last,” said Lady Fanny, with a smile.

Kitty meanwhile was following Thomas through the house, and speedily emerged on the low balcony overhanging the garden.

“What a pretty girl!”

The words fell on Olivia’s ear with a little shock of surprise. She was so accustomed to Kitty’s face and to seeing it often under disadvantage, and indeed thought so little about it at any time, that the simultaneous ejaculation of the two other girls made her take a second quick look, and that look brought a second shock.

Kitty, arrayed in a pale glistening gauze, whose tints set off her dazzlingly fair skin, Kitty with a rose-crowned hat surmounting her young face framed in its aureole of golden hair, was not merely pretty, she was lovely. There was a freshness, a vivacity, a brilliancy about her which even the Rushingtons, accustomed to the best specimens of English girlhood and critical in consequence, acknowledged generously.

“Charming!” murmured Mrs. Rushington under her breath, and for once she said exactly what she thought.

It could do no harm; there was no one present to contrast this radiant apparition with her own daughters in their somewhat unbecoming motoring attire. No one who mattered, at least,—and Kitty’s air of delighted *bonhomie*, her eagerness in narrating how luckily she had been caught, and how dreadful it would have been had Olivia’s note come one minute too late, could not but be flattering to all concerned.

“Only I am sorry you should have given up the Falconers’ party,” observed Olivia, who perhaps knew what this was sure to elicit.

“As if I wouldn’t a hundred thousand times rather

come to *you*." Though meant for an aside, the fervour of the speaker's accents rendered them audible to all.

As there could be no question of rivalry with Olivia's guests in Olivia's opinion, her note having set that point at rest, Kitty was now ready in her glorious position of henchman to demonstrate the wisdom of having been summoned, and perceiving that it was mainly by their numerical strength that the Rushingtons were formidable, she took it upon her, as she would never have done but for the present dire emergency, to make propositions in Olivia's presence. She looked at Amy and Phyllis and took their measure on the spot.

"Let us go to the strawberry beds," she cried.

Strawberries in abundance had been consumed at luncheon, and Mrs. Rushington cast a doubtful glance at the speaker, but the girls rose with alacrity, and Olivia breathed a sigh of relief as the three disappeared.

"Lady Fanny Thatcher's daughter? Dear me, I used to know Lady Fanny's people. I knew them quite well at one time, but we have lost sight of each other lately." Mrs. Rushington settled herself for conversation complacently. "So she is a neighbour of yours? I should like to meet her again. Are they anywhere near?"

"Fairly near, but they are gone to a garden-party this afternoon, Kitty says."

"Ah, yes. Another time you must ask them—that is if you will—when we are here. But how is it that they are not now in town, with a daughter to take about?"

"I really don't know," said Olivia, calmly.

"Are they, ahem—poor?"

"Not that I know of; they may be."

"Perhaps they have a large family?"

And to this Olivia had to assent. She could not feign to be altogether unconscious of the existence of ten little Thatchers within a short walk of her own house; and though she could deny all knowledge of Colonel Thatcher's affairs and Lady Fanny's proclivities, Mrs. Rushington soon settled the matter on the basis of numbers. A man with ten children, and children at the educating age, must feel hampered, even though the Thatchers whom she knew, and who were demonstrated to be Colonel Thatcher's relations, were well-off people, and no doubt Lady Fanny had money of her own.

"You say they live in a comfortable way" (Olivia had not said so, but "She would have known if they made a poor show," mentally argued her companion). "Still one may be able to do that in the country, and yet have no overplus to spare for London seasons. London seasons are terribly expensive, as I am sure I ought to know. The way in which even an ordinary dinner-party eats into one's house-books——" but here Olivia's spirit rose.

She could not, and would not, discuss house-books. Her own did not interest her, and she mentally spurned Mrs. Rushington's.

So deep was her disgust that she did what she very seldom did and was ashamed of doing—she cut her companion short with a complete change of subject.

"Your son looks sadly bored—('He looks what I feel,' to herself)—I wonder if he would care to go round the garden with me?"

The fly was cleverly thrown, and Algy's mother rose to it on the instant.

"Indeed, indeed he would. Algy, you would love that, would you not? And I will just rest here," and

the poor woman sank back in her chair with a sigh of satisfaction as the two strolled away.

The stable clock rang out four. "We are getting on," reflected Olivia resignedly, and she led the way to the lower garden.

And Algy found himself astonishingly happy in her company; he had been furious with his sisters for forgetting their promise, and had foreseen a miserable time till their return; but, behold, it was the best time of the day, the only time indeed he could be said thoroughly to enjoy. Olivia, freed from fretting companionship, and recognising a kindred spirit beneath an unpromising exterior, showed herself in a new light—gay, merry, fascinating. She took the boy into her confidence on various points; consulted him as to the little secret writing-place by the brook, which was already half-built and caught his fancy immensely; she even took a hint from Algy and gave an order in accordance with it. When the two reappeared after a prolonged absence they were on the best terms with each other.

But the first sight of Mrs. Rushington's parasol and of the converging figures of the rest of the party, now ready and eager for the tea which was being carried across the lawn, brought back the old Olivia, and Algy's next sentence faltered on his lips. "She's rather a funny woman," he told himself.

Tea was dispensed—a large tea, to which the Londoners did full justice; but Kitty was now looking anxiously at her hostess, and Olivia was very, very quiet.

Even Mrs. Rushington, though partially revived by a nap added to renewed maternal hopes, was not quite so vivacious as she had been, and the pauses became longer and longer.

"We are really making an unconscionable visitation." It was probably the sight of the chauffeur obtrusively visible in the entrance to the kitchen garden that extorted the above remark; but when no one denied it, and Olivia threw crumbs to the birds and feigned to be entirely occupied with them, the speaker was driven to proceed.

"The days are so long now one hardly realises," she murmured; "but we took the precaution of having no evening engagements, otherwise we should have had to go long before this, dear Olivia. The girls had a dance, but——"

"We can go to the dance if we want," struck in Phyllis, bluntly. "There will be lots of time if we start now."

"Yes, to be sure; then, perhaps—but about when does your husband return?" Suddenly Mrs. Rushington had a happy thought. "I have not seen him for such ages; I should just like to shake hands, if we can."

It was this Olivia was in dread of. The shadows had lengthened, and any moment might see Willie emerge from the house, and hear his pleased surprise at sight of the party, new and fresh to him, old and stale and sickened of by her. Willie would be effusive, demonstrative, all that was hearty and hospitable; worse still, he might, and very likely would, invite the guests, who had grown to be such an incubus on his wife, to remain on. Why should they go? Why should they not stay for dinner? Olivia, with real agony of heart, recognised the extreme probability of the above, with its absolutely certain result.

Mrs. Rushington was lingering, dawdling, catching at every pretext for delay, feigning interest in every caterpillar that crawled upon the grass, rather than issue

the order which should cut short the situation; and, though no one gave her any help, neither was it possible for her children to manifest haste to be gone.

"Do tell mother to come," ejaculated Amy, aside; but Phyllis shook her head. She was wrong; Olivia would not in the least have resented such a course of action.

And it was at this supreme moment, this excruciating crisis, that little Kitty Thatcher came to the rescue and earned the gratitude of her patroness for—as long as Olivia thought about it.

Kitty up and faced Mrs. Rushington, bent on outwitting her. Kitty had an innocent, baby-like face, and she made it assume its most babyish expression. "I should so love to go in a motor," she said. "I was wondering if you could—that is, if I might just get into yours and be dropped at our house? Oh, I do hope you won't mind my asking, but you pass our very door."

"Delighted, but——" It puzzled even the astute elder lady to continue on the instant, and she was saved the necessity.

"My mother would be so grateful," continued Kitty politely, "for I am rather late as it is; and she does not like my walking alone after five o'clock, even though it is very little over a mile. You are going soon, aren't you?"

Even Olivia smiled.

And in another ten minutes she smiled still more, and cried "Ooch!" and threw up her arms over her head, and all but danced a fandango on the doorstep, when the departing hands had ceased to wave and the faces had vanished down the drive, and Willie was still—what? Here he was at her ear.

"Guessed you'd rather I didn't show up before?" he observed tranquilly. "Waited in the library till they were off."

"Willie! Oh, you dear! But how did you ever know, how did you have the sense to know? Forgive me, Willie." In her exuberance she patted his hand and nodded at him with radiant eyes. "Dear Willie, it was too wonderful of you."

"I saw your face," said he.

The face changed. "Now, Willie, how can you, how dare you? My face?"

"It said, 'I'm dead beat,' and said it pretty much out loud," rejoined he.

"Why, then, it spoke the truth," suddenly Olivia burst out with exceeding bitterness. The whole thing was intolerable, insufferable; the day had been one long, hideous nightmare, and when she saw the last of the detestable gang——

"Hold hard, hold hard!" cried he, at this. But she refused to hold either hard or soft.

"Let me speak, let me speak, Willie. Oh, Willie, if you knew! It was bad enough at first, but it went on and on, and I thought it would never be over. And when I had done all I could for them—fed them, amused them, kept them till nearly seven o'clock—well, it was past six at any rate—all I got was Mrs. Rushington's mournful 'Isn't it *sad* to be going back to town, Algy?' and, 'Poor Algy will hate town more than ever after such a happy day!'"

"Poor little chap!"

"As if *I* were responsible for his hating town and his happy day!" continued Olivia, indignantly. "I don't dislike the boy; I rather like him, but I never brought him here, and I do think it was most cruel and wicked of his grasping old mother——"

"Easy now, my girl."

"Oh, Willie, *don't* say 'My girl'; you know how I dislike it." And she threw herself into a fresh attitude,

expressive of nervous irritability. "I can't bear more to-night, I really can't," she moaned, "and you might have some sympathy."

"I would, if I could help laughing."

"Laughing?"

At the tragic notes he laughed afresh, and flicked the ash from his cigar. "You are a bit agitated, my dear child, and when that is the case the extent of your vocabulary is amazing. However, blow off the steam if it does you good"—and he blew off a cloud of smoke by way of keeping the steam company, and folded his hands across his waistcoat.

"Willie, that is such a vulgar attitude of yours."

"Is it? It's a jolly comfortable one."

"You wouldn't sit like that if the Rushingtons were here."

"And you wouldn't talk like that, like you talked just now, if they were."

"Like you talked?" Olivia frowned. "Where can you, where do you pick up such expressions? One would really think, Willie, you had had *no* education."

"What should I have said?"

"As you talked, of course. The other is—but you often say it, and I know you will go on saying it."

"I daresay."

"About the Rushingtons," said Willie, waking up after a pause. "I'm glad if they were pleased, and you did the civil. It was rough on you, I own; but, after all, we are under an obligation to Rushington, as you know."

"I ought to know, I have heard it often enough." Olivia chafed. "Still I can't think it gives her a right to bully me, and call me 'Olivia!' and try to force an invitation for her boy out of me—making me feel rather a brute not to give it—all because of some horrid thing her husband once did for you."

"I expect she thinks it does give her some sort of a right."

"Then it is mean and disgusting of her, and, as for giving in to it, she shall find that I won't give in to it. I will not be at her mercy, why should I?"

"Go on, go on," said he placidly.

"People are so horrid, Willie, and you won't see it."

"You see for two, Olivia."

"I only ask to be let alone, and they won't let me alone. They pursue me and beat me down; I am a perfect prey—there you go, Willie, laughing again!"

"When a woman is beautiful, charming, fascinating——"

"Oh, nonsense," said Olivia, but the angry fit was over.

CHAPTER IV.

A NEW DEPARTURE.

It was an understood thing that Olivia never dined out.

"They really can't expect me to go to their great hot dinner-parties," she said—anything Olivia disliked she always called "Great,"—and in consequence invitations had almost ceased to come for these offensive entertainments; but one day not long after this Mrs. Seaford approached her husband with a note in her hands.

"I suppose we may as well accept this, Willie?"

"Accept what?" He paused in the act of putting on his hat to leave the house, and looked his surprise; to accept anything was a new departure.

"Read it," said Olivia, holding the note towards him. "It is not like a regular dinner-party, and I don't mind going for once, if they won't ask us again."

She had been prepared for the invitation; indeed it would not have been sent if such had not been the case; and it was at Kitty's instigation and rather against her own grain that Lady Fanny Thatcher had penned it.

"Because Olivia has made it so very plain, my dear, that she does not care to come here. However, if you think——"

"Oh, I *know*," said Kitty, decisively. "Because you see I—I kind of asked her. That is, I told Olivia about Professor Ambrose, and she was so much interested, and said she never had a chance of meeting any one of that

kind—so then I hinted, for I knew you and father wouldn't mind, that if she would really come——”

“In fact, you asked her.”

“Oh, don't say that to father. It was only because father was wondering who we could get to meet Professor Ambrose, and saying there was nobody, that I thought of Olivia, and how splendidly she would do _____”

“What's that, what's that?” said the colonel, entering.

When matters were explained, “She'll never come,” snorted he. “You may ask her, you may lick her boots if you like, but you'll only get a rebuff for your pains. What? Kitty thinks she will? Because Ambrose is a Somebody, I suppose? Because his name is in the papers and he is being talked about? Well, do as you please, ask her if you please, but if it was me I'm hanged if I would pander to that woman.” But of course it ended in Lady Fanny's writing the note.

“You see that Kitty was right,” said she, on receipt of the return missive. “Olivia thinks it so kind of us to invite her in this informal way, and is delighted to come.”

“Humph!”

“You can't find any fault with her acceptance, my dear. And she is certainly a very proper person to meet a distinguished guest. But we must have no one else.”

“Not even fat Willie?”

“Willie comes, of course.” Lady Fanny laughed. “It's certainly odd that a wife should so completely overshadow her husband as to make us take him for granted, but somehow one never does think of the Sea-fords as ‘The Sea-fords’.”

“Couldn't we get one other cock-and-hen couple?”

I shall have to take in her ladyship if there is to be no one else, and the very thought of her rubs me up the wrong way."

"Don't say so before Kitty, John."

"Where is Kitty?"

"Why, at The Willow House;" again Lady Fanny laughed. "It is her day there, and she flew over with my note, and I imagine is staying on, as a groom brought the answer." Then the speaker approached her husband and laid a gentle hand upon his arm. "I don't care for this friendship, John. I don't think it likely to do our child any good or bring her any happiness, but——" she stopped with a troubled look.

"It is not in our power to interfere with it," pursued Lady Fanny more firmly. "Kitty's infatuation, for such it is, is only to be kept within bounds by yielding——"

"Yielding? That's a wretched policy; stamp it out, say I."

"Neither you nor I can do that. By a concession here and there, and by giving a certain amount of countenance to their intercourse, we can prevent any underhand doings——"

"Good Lord, you don't say that? You don't mean a child of ours——"

"I don't think you quite know Kitty, my dear;" and at the end of half an hour Kitty's father knew a little more than he had ever done before.

"If it had not been Olivia, it would have been some one else," Lady Fanny further assured him. "Enthusiasm is in the blood at Kitty's age and with her temperament. Had she been a boy, she would have found vent for it in a career and plenty of hard work, but being a girl, and at the present moment rather an idle little girl who does not quite know what she wants, or how she

feels, or what her life is going to be, Olivia as Kitty pictures her, fills the vacuum. It would be equally cruel and useless to——”

“What she wants is a husband!” burst forth the colonel; but either his wife did not hear, or did not choose to hear.

Meantime Olivia was deigning to bestow upon her visitor a little more attention than usual. Philip Ambrose was a personage, was worth meeting, was worth an effort—and Olivia, albeit she would not openly say as much, permitted it to be seen.

“Of course I would not have let father and mother bore you for an ordinary person,” protested Kitty, eagerly. “I have saved you from being invited over and over again when we had only tiresome, stupid people; but when I heard them say that Professor Ambrose was simply to be wasted because there was no one about here fit to come and talk to him, I seized the opportunity. They thought you wouldn’t come, but I knew better.”

“How did you originally meet him?” inquired Olivia, letting the rest pass.

“At Oxford. Don’t you remember we were there one winter, when father first retired? And he knew some relations of ours, and—and—I really don’t remember any more about it. I didn’t take much notice, because at that time I didn’t care about people being clever, and he had a long neck, and didn’t row in the ‘Eights,’ and wasn’t in the least interesting. But of course it was very silly, and now that I know better I feel quite excited over him.”

“You little goose,” said Olivia, absently. Kitty’s exuberance was even sillier than Kitty’s indifference, and it rang a false note moreover.

A single breath of disdain from herself would have

withered it up, and she felt half inclined to blow the breath, but thought better of it.

"A man of mind like Professor Ambrose—do you call him 'Mr.' or 'Professor'?" broke off Olivia suddenly.

"Father calls him 'Ambrose,' mother calls him 'Mr.,' and I 'Professor'—but mother told me not to say 'Professor'; she said it was only done by themselves, and among themselves, and that I must have caught it from the men's wives down there. But, of course, if *you* say it——" and Kitty's lips parted expectantly.

"I shall certainly say what Lady Fanny says. I go so little into society that I don't pretend to know about such matters."

"Oh, but you do know. You could never do anything wrong." But here her divinity looked so distinctly bored that Kitty somewhat confusedly proceeded: "Do go on. What was it you were going to say about 'A man of mind'? I love to hear you talk, Olivia; I wonder how you and Philip Ambrose will talk to each other?"

"So you now call him Philip Ambrose?"

"Oughtn't I to? Behind his back I thought I might, it sounds more—human."

"Much more human. ('But I didn't expect it from a little prig like you,' mentally subjoined Olivia.) So you are wondering what we two will say to each other? I suppose you will have your little ears on the stretch all the time?"

"But you won't have him at dinner, I'm afraid. You must have father, as there will be no other lady present."

"If we are to be such a small party, there will be plenty of opportunity for conversation afterwards. Shall we sit outside after dinner?"

It was a hint, and as such Kitty caught at it. What

could be more delightful than to sit out in the warm, delicious dusk of a July night, with Olivia enthroned in the midst of an admiring circle, she and Ambrose conversing and all the rest listening, even her parents forced to acknowledge the queenship of her friend when even their distinguished guest would be paying her homage?

She was so full of it that she could talk of nothing else, and Olivia grew impatient and inattentive. Kitty, having said her first say could add nothing to it, and of what value were her conjectures and surmises? Kitty, it is true, had attained a kind of spurious importance for the moment, and her sympathy and aid on the occasion of the Rushingtons' visit had not been without its effect; but the memory of that fierce onslaught was fading, and the poor child was already slipping back to her original position when she produced Ambrose. Ambrose pulled her up a peg; but now, if she would only let him alone, and either talk of other things, or, better still, not talk at all!

Olivia wanted to consider and analyse the situation. Once before the brilliant young man who had sprung so suddenly into fame, had visited the Thatchers, the simple Thatchers, the Thatchers who made no pretence of "Culture" or "Intellectual life," and all the neighbourhood had been agitated, while Mrs. Seaford herself had gone so far as to own secretly that it was almost a pity she had so openly and repeatedly vented her dislike of country sociabilities.

At that time she did not know Kitty as Kitty, and had no means of discovering whether or no others had been more fortunate than herself in meeting Ambrose, but by a few adroit questions she now learned that this had not been the case, and was pleased accordingly.

"We could not ask ordinary people, you know," said Kitty, puffed with pride. "Mother said that if Mr.

Ambrose came to us expecting a few quiet days of rest and peace, it would be cruel to lionise him ; and I expect he would have come and gone now as he did then, without any one's having the good of him, if we could not have got you," and there was a beam of gratitude and delight.

All through the afternoon there were intermittent raptures. Every time the willing girl came back from the rose-garden to empty her basket—for she had been set to nip off the heavy heads of the roses while Olivia shook their petals free, and scattered them in the sun to dry for her bowls of pot-pourri—every time Kitty appeared with her freight, she had thought of something to say about Ambrose in the interim.

She was not to know that the subject so engrossing to herself interrupted and disturbed her friend. Olivia had left it behind. She was too much out of the habit of thinking of anything that did not emanate from herself to care about food for reflections tendered from without, and she was busy concocting a passage to be entered presently in her book, wherein the joys of intercourse with kindred spirits were to be set forth, while at the same time not overestimated. "The first and greatest treasure of the soul is in itself, all others are subordinate to this," she murmured. "First and greatest"—or should it be "Chief and purest"?—or stop—and her long slender fingers paused with a half-shed rose between them, while her eyes wandered into vacancy. "How lofty is the soul that needs no support from the souls of others. It may indeed descend at times to interchange—no, to barter—to barter its own conceptions for those of—of——"

"There, I think that's all."

It was Kitty back again, and Kitty, bearing her final basketful, which she proceeded to empty on to the

newspapers at Olivia's side, where she also seated herself.

"You make a perfect picture sitting here with all the roses round you," continued the girl, lovingly. "I wonder Mr. Seaford doesn't have you painted, Olivia. But I suppose," tentatively, "you would not care for the worry of it?"

"It would kill me," said Olivia, succinctly. A good many things would kill her, as Kitty was beginning to know. What she did not know was that Olivia occasionally said to herself, "It would kill me if I were never to be free from Kitty Thatcher." That afternoon seemed in fine the longest poor Kitty's goddess had ever known.

When it ended, Willie had, as usual, the benefit of it. "Oh, Willie, don't. Don't you begin about Mr. Ambrose too; I have heard nothing else for hour after hour. Poor man, how he would have hated it; for, of course, he groans under that sort of thing and is surfeited by it wherever he goes."

"Being made a fuss about, eh? Well, *you* won't, anyhow."

Of course she would not. Olivia smiled superior, and then somewhat resolutely changed the conversation, affecting an interest which she did not often exhibit in public affairs. If he did not mind, she would like to read the evening paper he had brought out, and she believed he was wanted in the stables.

"Coaching up for Ambrose?" suggested he, obediently preparing to depart, and though she affected to take the words in jest, he had hit the mark.

There was a good deal going on in the world, as Olivia was vaguely aware, and she did not feel sufficiently *au fait* with the latest developments to risk their being made topics of conversation on the following

evening without preparation. Not that she would be talkative and opinionative, oh, dear, no,—but she must be able to listen appreciatively, and drop here and there a telling word. The word need not be spoken to Ambrose, but he would catch it, he would address himself to her—presently he would see and hear no one but her. “The respectful adoration of a great man—the subjugation of a great mind”—all at once my heroine found herself formulating the above sentences and mentally transferring them to *The Peculiar Book* with the zest of a discoverer diving into the bowels of a new mine—and Willie returning, found her scribbling for dear life on a scrap of paper hidden within the folds of the newspaper. “I was only jotting down something I wished to remember,” quoth she, a shade confusedly.

“By the way, you never asked me what Ambrose was like, Olivia?”

“You? Asked you?” Olivia looked up in genuine surprise. “Asked you what Mr. Ambrose was like?”

“I was going to tell you, but you cut me short.”

His good-humoured face expressed sly exultation; it was not often that in his own mind he “Scored off” his wife.

“What were you going to tell me?” demanded she, quickly.

“What this great gun of yours and the Thatchers’ is like.”

“Mine and the Thatchers’, you absurd——”

“All right; the Thatchers’ then. Anyhow, I’ve seen him, and can describe him.”

“How? When?”

“Came down with him in the train. Knew who he was and offered him a light.”

“Then you talked to him?”

“Rather. The whole way down.”

Olivia's eyes grew round. "You might have said so;" but her accents of deep reproach elicited only a smile of triumph.

"Couldn't till you gave me a chance. I did make a shot, and you shied at his name and sent me off to the stables. I thought you'd cool down presently."

"You thought you'd like to tease me. However, do go on now," cried Olivia in an eager, natural tone that few people but her husband ever heard. "Do speak; do tell me about it. Tell me from beginning to end. How did you know it was he? How did you ever come to think of it? I must say it was rather sharp of you, Willie. Sometimes you really can be rather sharp, you know."

"Oh, when I'm let alone," quoth he, modestly, "I can find out a thing or two."

"Was it his look? Or did he say anything that gave you the clue? I suppose you only made a guess?"

"Not I. I told you I knew."

"But how? How could you know?"

"Saw the name on his portmanteau as large as life."

"Oh, Willie!" Her laugh rang out clear and sweet, the bell-like laugh that ought to have been heard so much oftener than it was. "Oh, you fraud!" cried she, laughing again.

"That was the way of it." His joyous bass chimed in gaily at his own expense. "Not much science in that, eh? But anyhow, it did the trick. 'Oho?' thought I, 'this will be nuts for Olivia;' so as he was hunting in his pockets for his match-box, I offered mine, and in two minutes we were talking away."

"He was smoking?"

"A rotten cigar. I could have given him one he

would have appreciated, but thought I'd better not. I'll take some with me to-morrow evening, though. Thatcher's not likely to have any worth a cent."

"What did you talk about?" demanded Olivia, waiving the question.

"Heaps of things. The chances of dissolution, and Balfour's speech, and—you'll find it all in to-night's paper."

"And what is he like, Willie?"

"Clever-looking chap; great, big, bumpy forehead, and rather a small face beneath. Not much colour; seems no great fellow for exercise; says he can get on without it."

"But that does not tell me what he is like. Is he dark or fair, tall or short, fat or thin?"

"You give me time and I'll spit it all out—hollo! I'm sorry; I promised never to say that again, didn't I?"—and he put out his hand and patted hers. "I don't like the sound of it myself; but you see, I'm with men all day——"

"If you were with the right sort of men——"

"But I'm not, and I can't help it. If I could mix with the neighbours down here——"

"Now, Willie!"

"I only say it would improve my manners, Olivia; and for your sake I wish they were better." The honest, truthful voice smote her with a sudden shame, and meeting with no response, he continued, apologetically: "I don't really like to be vulgar, you know; it is only that I can't quite hit off the right thing, and when I think I have just about got the hang of it something new crops up and I am all at sea again. But it isn't intentional. I wouldn't vex you for the world, my darling—not for the world."

"Oh, Willie."

"Well, isn't that right?" He strove to read her face wistfully.

"You are too good, too humble, too dear altogether," cried Olivia, impetuously. "I can't think how you can say such things even if you feel them. Who but you would ever own to a sense of inferiority——" and she broke off short, biting her lip.

"But why not? I *am* inferior, why should I not be supposed to know it?" rejoined he, seriously. "Surely it's better to know it than not? I often meet with fellows, commoner fellows than I, who haven't a notion that there is anything amiss with them. They are as cocksure of themselves as if they were dukes. They would thrust their noses into any company. Now I wouldn't. I say to myself, 'Look out; if people want you they'll let you know it,' and, of course, if they don't mind my being a bit rough and are friendly, it's all right. But one thing I've jolly well made up my mind about, Olivia, I'll never pretend to be what I'm not."

"You are a thousand times too good for me."

In his surprise the pipe he was smoking fell from Willie Seaford's fingers. He stooped to pick it up and turned a mazed countenance upon his wife.

"You are, you are," reiterated she, tremulously. "You never have a thought or a feeling that isn't true and pure and kind. You don't know what it is to be selfish or surly; you could not do a shabby trick or take a mean advantage to save your life; you are so noble in yourself that——"

"My dear child!"

"I will say it; do you think I don't know? Do you think I don't hate myself when I am cross and overbearing and make a slave of you—of you who never complain——"

"Complain? By Jove, I *like* it. What am I for but to be your slave?"

But Olivia was not to be intercepted. "Willie, when I hear you speak, it makes me feel so despicable, for I—I can't feel as you do, and oh, how I wish I could!"

"You are different," he was proceeding, after a moment's consideration, but the next saw Olivia on her knees beside him.

"Willie, oh, Willie, I have such bad moments; I take such a disgust at myself for being such a useless, selfish woman, so engrossed with my own little round—I long to do something, go somewhere, be anything but what I am . . . I dream my life away. . . . It is a delightful, beautiful life—but," she raised the face which had been half-hidden between her hands, "but——" she whispered and looked to him for the rest.

"It does not satisfy you?" said he, softly.

"It ought not to."

"And yet you don't feel you can rouse yourself?"

"I could rouse myself, indeed I could, if there were anything worth being roused for within my reach. Sometimes I feel as if I could rush to the ends of the earth if any work for me to do lay there. I could go through fire and water to accomplish it. When I read of great deeds, but I can't explain to you, Willie"—all at once there crept into the speaker's voice the old faint inflection of superiority—"because, although you are so much better and nobler than I, and though I do admire and love you for it, still you haven't *aspirations*, and I don't suppose you know what they are. You are quite the best and dearest of husbands, and I am your tiresome, troublesome, whimsical, fanciful, but not quite commonplace wife;" and as he raised her in his arms and laid her on his broad breast, pouring into her ear

the tender adulation which was so much distilled poison, and to which, alas ! it was but too well accustomed, the moment that might have been so great a one in Olivia's life fell barrenly away from it.

She even experienced a novel flow of spirits that evening, for, after all, youth is youth, and though my heroine had partly, if unconsciously, stamped out her own youth, at five-and-twenty the sap is still there.

She found herself thinking a good deal about the Thatchers' dinner-party, wondering how it would be done, picturing her own arrival on the scene, and in especial the effect it would produce on Philip Ambrose. He would have been told about her, of course. He would have been given conflicting descriptions such as must inevitably excite curiosity, especially since he had already made Willie's acquaintance and found him what he was. Evidently he had liked Willie, but that was not to say that he would expect Willie's wife to be anything out of the common. It would only be when the Thatchers gave in their several opinions that their guest would feel puzzled and interested—stop, would he, just at first, be interested ? She decided to make an immediate impression.

“ What are you going to wear ? ” demanded Willie suddenly, and it chanced that his wife was asking herself the same question, though not for the first time.

Very woman as she was, Olivia's thoughts had flown to her dress immediately on accepting Lady Fanny's invitation, and though Kitty's artless inquiries had been loftily smiled down, no sooner had her friend found herself alone than she had retired to her bedroom and opened the lower drawers of her wardrobe.

Here, immersed in rustling paper depths, lay various robes of rich material and exquisite design ; not, indeed, made according to the latest fashion, for some were

several seasons old, but so shaped and draped that their fanciful elegance belonged to no period, and appeared as appropriate to the present as the past. A gown on Olivia seemed a part of herself; it participated in its wearer's individuality.

But she had two favourites, and could not decide between them. A moonlight satin, taking different hues with every varying light, was dear to her heart, but unluckily the bodice fitted closely and was hot in hot weather. Also the train was heavy, for she had chosen a rich satin.

It had, in fact, been her Court dress—for Olivia, though you might not think it, had been to Court, and that not only on the occasion of her marriage. She had taken a sudden resolution to attend a Drawing-room two summers before, and left her card at the Palace afterwards; but as no notice was taken of this very proper proceeding, the moonlight satin, which had been made ready for either State ball or concert, was relegated to the wardrobe drawer.

Should she wear it at the Thatchers or not? Of course it was rather magnificent; but, again, the mauve gauze, with its bunches of heliotrope and ruffles of filmy lace, was even more glowing and shining—even more likely to throw into the shade the toilettes of Lady Fanny and her daughter.

"But I must wear one or other, I have nothing else," protested Olivia to an imaginary accuser. "I can't help it, if I have not clothes for every occasion," and she shook out the gauze.

Yet her heart inclined to the satin, and if only Willie would hold his tongue about it, and not exclaim "By Jove!" and stare at her with enraptured eyes, the satin it should be. She must warn Willie beforehand.

Then there had intervened the episode which for

want of a better term may be called the self-abnegation episode. Anything was good enough for the Thatchers' quiet little house and simple gathering. Her every evening tea-gown, or the black net that Willie hated—Lady Fanny would probably wear just such another black net, thus confirming the suitability of her guest's choice.

But then, again, why should Olivia Seaford descend to Lady Fanny Thatcher's dress level? Olivia, clad like any other woman in the room, was Olivia lowered in her own eyes. Lady Fanny, moreover, had the taste of an owl; and besides was an older woman, and a poor woman, and had no looks at the best of times.

"What are you going to wear?" quoth Willie at this point.

In a moment Olivia had decided. "My grey satin," said she, indifferently. The satin was hardly "Grey," but we all know how a word can be of use on occasion.

"Grey satin?" mused he. He could not remember any such garment.

"Why, of course," retorted Olivia, impatiently. "Don't be stupid, Willie. You know the gown as well as I do. I have not so many that——"

"Good Lord, you don't mean your Court dress!"

"And why not my Court dress? It is always civil to appear decent at one's friends' houses, however small the party."

"But won't they think—won't it seem as if you expected——" he paused inquiringly.

"Since I know exactly what to expect, there can't be any mistake about it," rejoined Olivia, with decision. "If I choose to look a little nice——"

"I say! Look a little nice! But you know best. You'll simply knock the spots out of everybody there, but you'd do *that* whatever you wore. It's a stunner,

that 'Grey satin' "—and he laughed and folded his hands in his accustomed attitude when pleased and entertained. "Oh, *I've* no objection, you may take your oath on that, my dear; no man objects to seeing his wife the belle of the evening."

"Dear Willie, you are so very old-fashioned." But Olivia was not annoyed, and presently rose from his side and went off to water her geraniums with a tranquil air that conveyed entire absorption in her pleasant task.

How was a mere man to divine that even as she sprayed the cool water about, her brain was busily at work respecting a matter as to which no one would have supposed Olivia Seaford would ever have bestowed a thought? Olivia had beautiful, abundant hair, and a clever maid who understood how to embellish her mistress's face by its luxuriousness. Olivia did not like when Kitty stroked and patted it, as Kitty had a foolish little habit of doing, with hot and timid fingers; but when the adoring girl confined her admiration to words——

"Oh, you should praise Laurette," her friend would rejoin good-humouredly enough. "Laurette is a good brusher, and I let her do what she likes with my hair, as long as she does not mind giving it a good brushing first."

"Mayn't I, oh, mayn't I brush your hair?" pleaded Kitty once, and was humoured—but it proved a martyrdom to Olivia.

Laurette knew exactly how to divide and separate the thick, silken tresses, how to brush with slow, monotonous, patient hand from their roots to their tips; Laurette never made nor found a knot; Olivia used to read and often fall half asleep beneath the soothing process.

But Kitty, talking, praising, wondering, holding out the long strands to admire their colour and texture; anon plunging into their midst with crude vehemence that created an immediate tangle—Kitty, emboldened to strike the tender scalp which at first she had merely tickled—and oh! how obnoxious was that weak tickle—was at once ineffectual and rough, feeble and violent.

“I don’t think you quite understand it, dear,” said Olivia, at last. “I should do no better. It is only some people who have the knack”—and considering what torments she had undergone, it was really creditable to her that she both looked and spoke gently—but the experiment was never repeated.

She was now debating a profound point with herself. Should she, or should she not, wear any head ornament on the following evening? Laurette would of course cry out for the diamonds—a fine set of stars which had been made for Mrs. Seaford on her marriage, and which had seldom seen the light since—but though she had stood out for her Court gown, Olivia hesitated before the added splendour of her diamonds.

And yet she longed to wear them. She was conscious that they became her well. She allowed herself to open their case.

And then she took out one and laid it against her hair. In another minute she had them all inserted, shining and sparkling in the evening light, and—we can guess how it ended.

“Yes, you can put in the diamond stars,” said Laurette’s mistress on the following evening, and Laurette, wise in her generation, obeyed without a word. No one understood Olivia better than her maid.

But when ready to descend, the former cast a final glance at herself in the glass, and there was a moment of hesitation which Laurette, bustling about the room,

affected not to see. Albeit a sober-minded girl, the very antithesis of the usual French abigail, Laurette had the instincts of her race and class; she knew that her lady was overdressed, and trembled lest Olivia should at the eleventh hour perceive this also. With her it was "Madame goes so seldom into company that when she does, it goes that she makes her presence *felt*. Madame makes of this little party an *occasion*. She must be talked about, remembered; she must make her *triumph*—*voilà!*"—and, as we say, the honest girl shook in her shoes lest Madame should suddenly see the matter in a new light.

A dubious expression had stolen over Madame's face; what might this not portend? *Hélas!* if Madame, gazing at that so enchanting image in the mirror, foolishly gave way to stupid English prejudices—with a start of joy, Laurette heard the roll of wheels beneath the bedroom window.

She peeped out; yes, the carriage was there.

"Madame's cloak," said Laurette demurely, and whipped a long silk cloak around her mistress with brisk confidence—a confidence ready to be startled into a cry of dismay at the first breath of protest.

Nor would Laurette meet the gaze turned towards her with a kind of dumb appeal that had in it something even of pathos. Madame was obviously troubled in spirit. Were she to say, "Laurette, tell me truly, is my appearance *convenable*?" what could poor Laurette reply? It would be horrible, frightful, to be called upon to destroy the so exquisite creation which, perfect down to the minutest details, stood before her; or again it would be cruel—certainly it would be cruel to wound Madame's repose in herself, that repose which was so essential to her appearance, even if no alteration were made.

Wherefore the easiest, nay, the only way was not to see those perturbed eyes.

Ah! how beautiful they were, how large and soft. As Olivia sat beneath Laurette's hands during the previous prolonged hair-dressing, the latter had whispered her admiration to herself—but to be moved by their expression to undo her most felicitous handiwork, despoil their lovely owner of half her charms?—bah!—what folly! Laurette's little hard hand shook with impatience as she tendered fan and gloves, fearful to the last of what her mistress would do—but Olivia went slowly downstairs.

It was inevitable that Willie should notice the diamonds; and his "Let's have a look at you," and complete and unalloyed exultation in the look, were not without their effect; nevertheless there was a slight tremor in his wife's bosom and a subdued expression on her countenance as she entered the 'Thatchers' domain.

She was feeling ashamed of herself. The feeling had begun almost at the outset of her desire to wear the satin dress, and she had struggled with and overcome it; then her husband had had to be converted; and finally she had been cognisant of Laurette's surprise, thinly veiled by prompt obedience.

To none of them would she yield, but to herself she was now saying, "Why did I do it—how could I do it?" with ever-increasing vexation and self-disgust, and perhaps it was at this hour and consequent on this trivial humiliation that the first glimmerings of the awful solitude she herself had created round herself dawned upon Olivia Seaford.

She entered the circle awaiting her reception with a blush upon her cheek. Her lip quivered as she replied to their greetings. Something seemed to rise in her

throat, and she felt all at once so tired that it was a relief to sit down.

As predicted, Lady Fanny Thatcher was arrayed in sober, matronly black, broadly tuckered round the neck and shoulders where her ladyship was inclined to *embon-point*. A black velvet ribbon fastened by a pearl brooch confined her throat, and in front of her bodice there was another and handsomer brooch, whose fine stones afforded a sort of vague consolation to Olivia, at which she would have laughed at another time.

Kitty was in a little schoolgirl frock of simple white—and the rest of the party were men, in the usual black coats.

The regal apparition which swept into their midst was more alone than Olivia had ever felt herself before.

CHAPTER V.

“LEANING FORWARD WITH HIS NOSE ON HER LAP!”

THERE was nothing to add to her embarrassment. Her hosts were much too well-bred to let any sign of their inward surprise escape, and the party readjusted itself and Mr. Ambrose was presented with quiet, informal ease and friendliness.

Willie was, of course, talking away at once. Willie, however, was at his best—simple, cheerful, unpretending, with plenty to say on ordinary topics, yet listening, too, when others spoke. He had a native politeness which made it natural for him to think everybody's opinion as good or better than his own, and his training under Olivia rendered the latter attitude the more familiar of the two,—so that, whatever misdemeanours he had to be corrected for at home, his wife had nothing to fear for him abroad.

She had only herself to think about ; nor did she even have that long ; dinner was announced five minutes after the Seafords' arrival, and one pleasant shady room was exchanged for another and all seated round a well set-out table ere Olivia had recovered sufficiently from her confusion to take stock of her surroundings.

She then found herself placed between Colonel Thatcher and Philip Ambrose, the latter having had to be put on the wrong side of his hostess to meet the exigencies of the case. He had taken in Kitty, but he could not sit by her.

The colonel, however, had been exhorted not to engross his partner, and had roared at the notion.

"There is nothing to laugh at," cried Kitty, indignantly. "Of course you can't talk to me, and if you start one of your favourite topics with Olivia——" but here her father shouted afresh.

"Start one of my topics with that woman!"

"My dear—my dear!" adjured Lady Fanny.

"Pray, miss, what are my topics?" demanded the old soldier, composing himself. "Come now, let's hear! Tell me in order that I may keep off 'em, for upon my word, I wouldn't start a topic with Madam Seaford if I knew it."

Whereupon Kitty muttered something about "Military matters," at which even her mother smiled, but the colonel drew himself up stiffly, reddening a little.

And he would not speak to his daughter, but at her.

"I don't think I am in the habit of forcing shop-talk upon any one, whatever that little minx may choose to say for the sake of being impertinent. As for thrusting it upon ladies—and upon this one in particular, who doesn't know a horse from a cow, or a bullock-waggon from a go-cart—I shan't enlighten her, I promise you."

"Father, I do want you to be nice to Olivia."

"Eh?" said he, starting. But such an anxious little face was turned upon him, and Kitty took so patiently a few more disparaging remarks which he was conscious must be hard to bear, that eventually he patted her shoulder and assured her his bark was worse than his bite.

"I hope I know how to behave in my own house, child; and when I've done the civil, I'll hand the lady over to Ambrose with all the pleasure in life. If he can make anything of Madam Olivia, he's heartily welcome;"

and shrugging his shoulders the speaker closed the controversy.

To his horror he now found himself careering along in full blast on one of the very tabooed "Topics," with Olivia's sympathetic eyes luring him on. Olivia, shaken out of her usual serenity and unable to regain it, sat the picture of meek attention, her bent neck a sight in itself.

An intelligent listener is a delightful object; and when that listener puts a pertinent question and hangs upon the answer with parted lips, what mortal can resist the snare?

"No, no, my dear," said the colonel,—and was in the act of massing salt-cellars and spoons to form a fortification, when, looking round for an extra bastion, he met Kitty's look.

"I think I understand," said Olivia, thoughtfully—but though her own jewelled fingers played with the spoons and she showed, as her instructor subsequently owned, "Wonderful quickness in picking up the idea of the thing," his lesson came to an abrupt end.

"Here's Kitty thinks I'm boring you to death."

"Bored with this?" exclaimed Mrs. Seaford with animation. "It is seldom, indeed, I hear anything half so interesting"—and as she spoke Philip Ambrose looked round.

Shall we say that she meant him to look, meant him to hear the tones of a peculiarly sweet and musical voice, to note a fair and slender hand upon the table, and fire his curiosity respecting the owner of these charms? Perhaps she did. While affecting that absorption which subjugated her guileless host, it is permissible to suspect that a presence on Olivia's other side was not wholly lost sight of, and that she was now beginning to feel the time had come for drawing Ambrose within her influence

"I was just showing Mrs. Seaford a plan of campaign," began the colonel, addressing him, and stoutly ignoring an irrelevant remark on his other side designed to remind him of his contract. "It is not often that I talk shop, but——" and he glanced at his whilom auditor as though to say, "Could any man refrain under such provocation?"

"And now, if father will only be quiet and let *them* talk," cried Kitty to herself, and a warning foot pressed his beneath the table.

"Tchick, what is it? What d'ye want? Nonsense! Ridiculous!" muttered he, but her object was attained. Ambrose had addressed Olivia, and Olivia's face was turned towards Ambrose.

The great moment had arrived, and it was one for which each had been consciously longing; Olivia because it was for this she had come, Ambrose from a complexity of motives into which we need not at present initiate our readers. Suffice it to say that the equable flow of Lady Fanny's conversation had fallen upon ears not precisely deaf, but distracted and impatient, that he had felt he could get *that* at any time, and that there was a woman on his other side the like of whom he had never been in company with before.

The Oxford ladies were dowdy and talked Oxford: talk diluted, it is true, in feminine fashion, but still in essentials the same as that which fell from the lips of their husbands and fathers, and of it Philip Ambrose was sick to death.

Hitherto it had enveloped him—he now felt suffocated him. He had "Arrived," he needed it no longer.

As a very young man no one had been more anxious to assimilate himself with the traditions, associations, habits and customs of the place than the new undergraduate of Baliol; he was "Varsity" to the backbone;

he had or appeared to have no other existence than that led in college and quadrangle.

During vacations he disappeared with reading parties, or in later years by himself,—but if he ever went home, if he joined any family circles, or had invitations to relations' houses, he never said so. It was understood that scientific research was his mania, and scientific research on the part of a young aspirant forms a very effectual barricade against the clamour of his fellows for his society.

Then all at once the name of Philip Ambrose began to be whispered. He was a marked man, a coming man; eyes were turned upon him; he was pointed out in High Street and Broad Street; the "Heads" slowed their pace when his figure was discerned approaching, and, most potent sign of all, instead of accosting the young don, they, the seniors, waited to be accosted. If Ambrose hurried past with a mere salute, Provost and Principal understood that his meditations were of national value and not to be interrupted even by their august selves.

Finally the young professor blossomed forth as famous far beyond University walls and boundaries. His knotted brow, deep-set eyes, and compressed lips were recognisable in illustrated papers and shop-windows. Booksellers offered his books—did not wait to be asked for them. Pioneers of thought discussed his ideas; what Ambrose of Oxford had to say on such and such a subject was of importance, and was said for him by men infinitely greater than himself. And when savants from all quarters of the globe pronounced that a new star had arisen in their midst, the scholarly recluse felt that the hour had come when, having so much, he could have something more—he yearned for that feminine intercourse and sympathy which hitherto he had denied himself.

Hence his visit to the Thatchers.

The Thatchers were simple people, but simple people with pleasant manners and refined tastes afford a sedative to brain fag second to no other. For twenty-four hours Ambrose enjoyed and profited by it.

He was pleased with everything and every one.

The little green domain seemed a veritable Paradise, and Kitty, in her white frock, with her pretty ways and joyous chatter, the most charming Kitty imaginable.

He followed her about, letting himself drift where she drifted, taking part in her rural occupations, and growing gayer and younger through each hour of her companionship.

He was at pains to do away with the awe with which the young girl was inspired by his name and fame. He laughed it aside; presently he was half annoyed by it. What sort of an old bear did she think she had got hold of? She demurred to the title of "Bear". It was his age then? Come, how old did she take him for? Kitty, blushing, declined to say; but, pressed, owned that she supposed he might be—and stopped.

"I am eight-and-thirty," said he; "does that seem so very terrible to you?"

It did, but of course she protested, and a merry war ensued.

When Kitty and the younger ones got up a game of croquet-golf, and their father appeared on another part of the lawn with bowls in his hands, Ambrose would have none of the bowls. "They are for the old codgers," whispered he, with a sly look, and as a couple of old codgers who had been summoned to form a quartet, appeared at the moment the recusant left them "To fight it out" and boldly enrolled himself in the other ranks.

So that by the end of the afternoon there was no longer any tremor on the part of boys and girls left

alone with their celebrity; he was such a shocking player and had to be so often instructed and rebuked that they insensibly lost sight of his formidable personality, and saw only the worst shot on whosever side he was, the feeble opponent who could be easily disposed of, or the lame adherent who had to be helped along; with one accord they made excuses for him, and loudly applauded when luck redeemed the blunders made by ignorance and awkwardness.

All were late in going to dress for dinner, and Ambrose was conscious of wishing that nobody were coming for dinner.

He was so well content with things as they were that any addition to the circle was a nuisance, and he almost told Kitty it was a nuisance. His manner, indeed, did so tell her, whereat she laughed to herself, the extra gaiety of her spirits being due to the very prospect he deprecated, a prospect which had rarely if ever been accorded Olivia's nearest neighbours before.

Certainly Olivia had never dined at the 'Thatchers' since Kitty's *début*; and there was an excitement about her coming—apart from her coming to meet the great Professor Ambrose, whom Kitty could now assure her was not only "Great" but "Nice"—that nothing could allay.

Kitty was down early, looking round, seeing that all was right. Her toilette had been hurried through that she might have a few moments for this survey—for seeing that the windows stood open as at The Willow House, also that her mother's sofa cushions were arranged as Olivia arranged hers. Since the Seafords had the latest books and magazines lying about, such as could be mustered by Olivia's zealous worshipper were made the most of in like fashion. She stood here, she stood there, studying effects; she pushed back a footstool that pro-

truded and swept a clear path for her divinity; she turned the flowerpots so that their handsomest blooms should at once strike Olivia's eye; Lady Fanny came down to find her workbox on her own little table by her own corner of the sofa above mentioned, in the act of being carried away.

"Because you won't do any work to-night," argued Kitty, and the workbox, to her mother's secret amusement, disappeared.

Ambrose, when he essayed to take up anew the place he had won with his little partner of the afternoon, found Kitty absent and unresponsive, whereat he drew into his shell at once. He was so unaccustomed to being met by a distrait demeanour and curt rejoinders that he hardly knew how to take such. He himself was feeling warm and genial. Did Miss Kitty mean to make him feel less so? Had she divined—but really there was nothing to divine. He was himself barely conscious of the pleasurable sensation inspired by her presence; he was not in any way dominated by it—it was rather early in the day for that; he experienced a sense of affront, and turned to Lady Fanny resolutely.

Then appeared Olivia Seaford blotting out every one in the room, and Ambrose's eyes started from his head. Heavens! what an exquisite creature! What beauty, what grace, what dazzling, radiating splendour!

It was the diamonds and the dress that did it, of course—yet stay, that is hardly fair to Olivia. She had a face whose charms could be enhanced and could not be debased by adornment. Some faces when purposely set alight are irresistible—but that is not to say that all the credit belongs to the setting. And then Olivia was not quite her serene self at the moment, and this also, strange to say, rather added to than took from her appearance. She could hardly be called agitated, but

she was certainly not calm. She did not exactly beseech pity, but there was no air of demanding applause. Never in her life had she appeared to greater advantage, and trivial as was its source the effect was certain.

For a while, as we know, conventional demands had to be submitted to, and neither of the guests of the evening—for they shared the honours between them—could bestow attention on the other, but once the supreme moment arrived, all else went down before it.

“And *don't* mind us, do go on having him to yourself,” adjured Kitty, following Olivia out on to the lawn where chairs were grouped and coffee handed. “I’m only keeping his chair till he comes,” whispered she, having inserted her friend into one of two carefully placed apart. “You do like him, don’t you? And he—oh, any one can see what he thinks of you,” and on the approach of the gentleman presently, she bounced up and looked so meaningly at Ambrose that Olivia nearly rose also. Kitty’s methods were too crude. It was not till Ambrose unhesitatingly availed himself of them that she was forgiven—and forgotten.

But who could think of Kitty then? Hour after hour passed, the light waned, and some of the party went indoors, but still the low duologue went on.

“’Pon my soul,” muttered Colonel Thatcher, and stood irresolute twirling his moustache. “She’s got her claws into him and no mistake. If some one doesn’t interfere they’ll sit there all night;” but though he made a step or two forward, so unconscious of his proximity were the delinquents that he had to pass on as though he had never had any other intention. “I can’t, and if Seaford won’t, there’s nothing to be done,” he muttered as he went.

Lady Fanny fared no better. “My dear Olivia, are

you not afraid of the night air?"—but Olivia was not in the least afraid of the night air.

"I am often out as late as this," averred she, with perfect veracity, "it is my favourite hour."

"Shall Kitty fetch a shawl to throw over your shoulders, my dear?"

"Thanks. I am not in the least cold, only just getting a little cool, and it is so delightful here." Olivia looked up from her low seat, and spoke with an animation that ought to have gratified a hostess, but she did not offer to move, and the elder lady, who was standing over her with the express intention of bringing the scene to a close, was forced to retreat discomfited.

"Can't *you* get her to budge either?" growled the colonel, who had watched from afar. "What did she say?"

"I was afraid Olivia might find the night air chilly."

"Tut—nonsense—you went to stop her making a fool of herself. What did she say?"

"She seemed to think she was content to remain where she was." A slight vexation which she could not repress manifested itself in the speaker's accents; she was conscious of having done her best to uproot Olivia and of having been foiled by a will stronger than her own.

"Cart-ropes wouldn't drag her from that chair, eh?"

"Oh, my dear, cart-ropes!" Lady Fanny laughed deprecatingly.

"Bet they wouldn't. You're no match for that sorceress."

"Really, you take the matter too seriously, John. I only thought that our party was a little broken up, but if Olivia prefers it so——"

"She prefers turning Ambrose's head to behaving

like any decent-mannered woman. I wonder her husband allows it."

"He knows it is only her way. Olivia is so accustomed to consulting her inclinations without regard to appearances——"

"That she plays the very deuce with appearances once she gets the chance. What in thunder can she and he find to say to each other all this time—that is, if it is not downright flirtation, as you won't want to allow it is."

"They are probably talking about books," said Lady Fanny feebly.

"Books? Not a bit of it. It's 'Souls' and 'Affinities' and all that tommy-rot that lands married women in the divorce courts."

"John!"

"Aye, you may say 'John'; you may think I don't know what I'm talking about, but I do. I have seen enough of that kind of thing in India, and can scent the beginnings of it."

"Dear John, you really ought not to——"

"I tell you I don't like the way Seaford is treated. He is as good a fellow as ever lived, but he is too easy with her; he has not got his hand on the bridle as he ought to have with a wife like his. He knows now that he has got to keep out of the way and not spoil her game. He knows he'd catch it if he interfered; so he goes off with the young ones and affects not to see. It's as plain as a pikestaff, and if I had known there was going to be such an exhibition as that," pointing to the dimly-outlined figures still stationary on the lawn, "I'm hanged if I would have allowed either of them the opportunity for it on my premises."

"Come, come, you make too much of it, my dear, indeed you do. Olivia is a little carried out of herself

by the unusual pleasure of meeting with a kindred spirit, one who, I daresay, can understand and respond to her peculiar cast of mind. You must own that she does not often enjoy this advantage; we are a humdrum set of folks in this neighbourhood, and Kitty tells me that Olivia feels herself thrown away."

"She says that to Kitty? Devil take her impudence!"

"I never said she *said* so, I said she felt it. And indeed it is more than likely that the feeling itself is involuntary. When a person has a refined, poetical, imaginative temperament, and feeds it by leading the life apart Olivia Seaford leads, it is inevitable that she should unconsciously come to regard others with whom she believes herself to have nothing in common, as uninteresting and unworthy of notice. If one could only prevail on her to think a little less about herself——"

"Which is just what you'll never do. And as for Ambrose, like an ass, he is ministering to her vanity. His attention and flattery—Look at him now, leaning forward with his nose almost on her lap! No doubt he is telling her that she is an angel on a mudheap. What? I shouldn't be a bit surprised. And sneering at good old Willie for a money-grubber. If you can defend *that*——"

"I am quite sure Mr. Ambrose is talking properly and agreeably, as he always does. My dear John, do think how absurdly unlikely it is that he would make any animadversions on a husband to a wife whose acquaintance he has only just made, even supposing he ever did such a thing at any time."

"If she leads him on——"

"And would Olivia do so? Has she ever done so? Be just to her, John. No human being, not even Kitty,

who appears to have attained more insight than the rest of us into the Seaford family life, has ever heard Olivia belittle her husband. I own that she is behaving a little foolishly to-night, and were she a daughter of mine I should give her a hint on the subject, but as for supposing that she would stoop to any confidences derogatory to her dignity——”

“Oh, aye, she stands upon her dignity, I daresay; but mark my words, it’s the women who set themselves upon pedestals and fence round the pedestals to boot, who come the worst croppers. Hullo!” as voices and figures suddenly emerged from the darkness at his elbow—
“Hullo! where have you been all this time?”

At the same moment another voice was heard from the opposite direction:—

“Please ask for the carriage, Willie.”

And Olivia’s tones were as clear and soft and unconscious as those of a child. The edge of her satin dress was dank with dew, but the warm colour stood in her cheek and her eyes glowed. “What a delightful evening!” exclaimed she, looking from one to the other. “The scent of your laurel flowers, Lady Fanny, made me wish that we had old laurels in our garden too. Ours are too young to blossom.”

“A delightful evening indeed.” It was Ambrose who took up the note with a fervour that was not lost on one at least of his audience.

“Confound the fellow!” muttered the colonel under his breath.

“We are deeply indebted to you for it,” and Ambrose, too, instinctively addressed Lady Fanny, who stood mildly recipient. “It is seldom one has the chance—at least, it is seldom *I* have the chance—of enjoying a July evening in such perfection. Beauty and fragrance everywhere. Even the bats and the moths—even the fat

toads—even one rascally mole that played havoc with your grass, colonel,” laughing and nodding to him, “all seemed to belong to an enchanted world.”

“Humph!” said Colonel Thatcher, turning on his heel.

But Kitty was squeezing Olivia’s hand ecstatically. It was she who had arranged the hunt for the missing croquet ball—indeed, to confess the whole truth, it was she who had hidden the ball in the thickest tangle of the flower beds in order to leave the field clear for her friend. Olivia had said something about the “Usual stiff circle” which formed on occasions like the present, and the phrase was all that was needed.

The ball had been found too soon, despite every cunning effort, and Eddy’s joyful cry of triumph made another suggestion necessary: “Let us see if there are any wild strawberries out?” was Kitty’s next, and away went the whole troop, headed by kindly Willie Seaford, into the depths of the wood. And here it was, “Do let us climb to the summer-house,” and at the summer-house, “Let us play a game,” and by one ruse or other a good hour and a half was secured to Olivia sitting on the lawn.

Nor did her valiant little champion stop there. “We have had such fun,” cried she, striking in now with gleesome vigour, “we really couldn’t come back before. You didn’t mind, did you, mother?”—once more Lady Fanny appeared the approachable person of the group—“we had ‘Rounders’; and we knew you wouldn’t mind Eddy’s staying up for once, because he does so love ‘Rounders’!”

“And I found the ball,” added Eddy, hugging it.

The carriage was announced, and the host returned; he was not going to let any other arm than his be offered to conduct Mrs. Seaford to the door.

She dropped her glove, however, and it was tendered by some one close behind.

"That was done on purpose," said Colonel Thatcher to himself—but he was wrong. Olivia did not resort to such methods. She had already invited Mr. Ambrose to call on her, and the hour of his doing so had been fixed upon between them.

And Olivia was bright and loquacious during the homeward drive, not silent as the indignant colonel pictured her.

She would not have the windows nor even one window closed, the night air was still so warm, so delicious. Her cloak was open, and presently slipped from her shoulders. Willie felt something wet against his foot, and horrified, held up the soaking rim of the satin dress, but Olivia merely glanced at it.

"It is too long at any rate," she observed, indifferently. "Laurette will be glad to cut some off," and she pushed the wet edge out of sight.

"And you had a pleasant evening?" quoth he presently. "Ambrose is an agreeable fellow and gives himself no airs. I was sure you would like him. No, I won't smoke any more to-night, my dear, thank you; I have had all I want. Nice little lot of children there. My word, they made me run about too."

"I am afraid neither of us was over civil to the old couple," said Olivia, genially; "you going off with Kitty and the young ones, and I being left with Mr. Ambrose. But really one can't be expected to talk prosy talk—I mean it would have been such waste—that is, I couldn't help his rather usurping me, could I, Willie?"

"He usurped you, did he?"

"It was his doing, it was indeed," said Olivia, eagerly. "I was sitting there, as you saw—it was Kitty by the way who put me into that chair—and he came to the

other at once. And somehow, when we began to talk, we forgot the others. When I looked round after a little, every one had gone. I did not see that it was necessary to follow them, though I did make a sort of attempt, but Mr. Ambrose——” she paused.

“Why, of course, Ambrose preferred your company to that of the good old Thatchers. They can’t talk *up* to him as you can. If he had been younger, perhaps he might not have seen Kitty’s vanishing as she did though.”

“Kitty!” said Olivia, rearing her chin.

“You think you can hold your own against a dozen Kittys? And so you can, unless a man is on the marry, which it is pretty plain our friend over there isn’t. Still he might do worse than little Kitty Thatcher; a nice girl, and pretty, and all that. And now that Fellows need no longer be bachelors, and Ambrose makes a lot by his books, and will go up the tree like fun too——”

“What *are* you talking about?” said Olivia, coldly.

“I was only wondering,” said Willie; after a minute he resumed: “Clever men don’t always want clever wives. The life of a man like Ambrose must be an awful grind, and a nice cheerful little creature who would pull him off his high horse at times, would suit him very well. Of course, she is rather young.”

Olivia made a restive movement.

“Sensible enough, though,” continued he, on receiving no response. “The way she mothers those other children shows that. They are evidently accustomed to her authority, and the eldest daughter of a large family soon learns to stand upon her feet.”

Olivia yawned, Kitty standing on her feet or her head was alike to her.

“So you don’t think anything will come of his being

here?" proceeded Willie, after a pause. "I daresay not. How long does he stay?"

"He said nothing about going. He is coming over to call on us to-morrow."

"Is he? But to-morrow is Thursday, my late day. I'm afraid I shan't be home before eight. Of course, I might manage"—and he ruminated alarmingly.

Alarmingly, for this was just what Olivia feared; by putting on pressure she could nearly always bring her husband out by an early train even on a Thursday, and if there were any disagreeable prospect in view which his presence could alleviate, any boredom which it could avert, he was peremptorily summoned. He might now think that a distinguished visitor who had announced his intention of calling at The Willow House would expect its master to be there to do the honours.

"I shouldn't bother," said she, quickly.

"Ambrose wouldn't think it uncivil? You could explain?"

"He would not dream of your leaving your business because he, being at a loose end, wanders over here to pass away the time. That is what it amounts to. We made rather friends, he and I, and——"

"And I should only be in the way," said Willie, relieved. "You'll show him your garden and your books; and, I say, there are cigars on the smoking-room table, mind you offer them; he simply snapped at those I took with me to-night, and I filled his case for him."

"I thought there was something curiously familiar about the smell of that smoke," laughed Olivia, with lightened brow. "So it was yours? Till to-night I always thought all smokes smelt alike, but Colonel Thatcher's was absolutely different and quite disagreeable. I will say, Willie, yours is never disagreeable; it can be even rather pleasant—sometimes."

"I do have the best," allowed he, modestly. "I don't have many extravagances, as I think you'll own, Olivia—but I can't stand cheap cigars. So you spotted mine to-night? Did you say so to Ambrose?"

"He asked if he might smoke, and I said 'Yes—in the open air,' and that was all. We were talking of other things."

"About his work, I suppose? They say he's a regular whale for work."

"About his work, yes, a little."

"You were able to keep trot with him? To understand what he was speaking about?"

"He seemed to think so."

"Well, we've had a very jolly evening," summed up he as the carriage stopped. "I shouldn't mind a few more such. Perhaps when people find out you can go to them if they produce a man like Ambrose, they'll look about. They'll think it's worth their while to hunt up a celebrity. I daresay it'll go the round that he came to call on us too," added he, with a simplicity that Olivia might have scoffed at, but did not.

She was very gentle with Willie that evening. She looked into his untroubled eyes wherein sat no jealousy, and listened to his cheerful accents wherein lurked no reproof, and felt herself rehabilitated in her own esteem, which had vaguely suffered at the Thatchers' hands. Even Kitty's "You did have a beautiful time, didn't you?" was all unconsciously a sting.

Olivia was not a woman of quick perceptions, or perhaps it was that she had dulled them by disuse, but she had interpreted aright the angry thrust of Colonel Thatcher's arm towards her, and the march of his step as he guarded her to the door.

Guarded, that was the word. And he had snatched the dropped glove from Ambrose and persistently stood

between him and the carriage door—there could be no mistake as to what were the colonel's sentiments. Lady Fanny, too, had permitted her guests to take their leave without any of the effusion customary among neighbours. She had kissed Olivia, but the kiss was a cold one; and the rapturous expressions with which the latter had greeted the reassembled party were exchanged for the most formal and inevitable of common-places when it came to "Good-bye".

Alone with Willie, his wife half-expected him to explode, though had he done so her resentment would have been prompt and deep. That she could not be trusted to take care of her own dignity, that she should be subjected to ridiculous aspersions, etc. ! Willie would have cried for mercy and grovelled for forgiveness ere she had done with him.

But Willie, smiling and sleepy and talking about their jolly evening, was a Willie who raised a dim, undefined sensation of comfort within Olivia's breast. She would have liked to tell him how horrid the others were, to enlist his sympathy and partisanship for herself, and to—no, she did not exactly desire to dilate upon Philip Ambrose to her husband.

It would be safest perhaps to let the Thatcher family alone also, seeing that their attitude had passed unnoticed, and now that Willie had been told about the impending call, and had taken it as a reasonable man should, even to the proffering of his best cigars, there was nothing to detract from the lustre of the prospect. She leaned over the banisters and called down a gay nothing to the figure in the hall below as she passed upstairs.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TENANT OF PUMP COTTAGE.

BUT perhaps it is hardly to be wondered at that Mrs. Seaford was not down for breakfast next morning.

Habitual dissipation, though it must be paid for in the long run, gives a certain amount of credit—but the isolated plunge demands cash on delivery and waits at the door. Olivia had slept brokenly and awoke feverish.

"You see I never can stand excitement," murmured she to Willie, bending over her pillow; "this is only what I expected."

"But, I say, you are not bad, are you?" He laid his hand on hers, and felt how hot it was.

"Only tired; I shan't get up just yet."

"You are sure there is nothing that——"

"Oh, yes, quite sure." She threw back the sheet and turned over restlessly.

"You won't do anything or go anywhere or see anybody to-day, dear?" He had forgotten about Ambrose, and Olivia looked at him curiously.

"I shan't stir beyond the garden, Willie. But I told you Mr. Ambrose was coming."

"Ambrose? But I could put him off as I go by; I could leave word that you were a little over done."

"No, no. No, please don't." There was a swift change of tone. "By the time he comes I shall be all right, and"—she laughed a little but not quite natur-

ally—"tired of my own company perhaps. Besides, when a man like that offers to call——"

"To be sure. It is a compliment, and he may not have another opportunity. You'll explain how I can't be here, and say I'm sorry and all that?"

"I'll say all that's proper, Willie."

"If he could stay for dinner——"

"He could not; of course, he could not. Oh, never mind about him, perhaps he will never come; he may only have said it on the spur of the moment, and the Thatchers may arrange something else for this afternoon."

"But you'll take care he doesn't think me rude? If I had been by when he suggested calling——"

"Oh, Willie dear, that'll do; there's no need for a fuss. If he comes, he comes; if not, it doesn't matter,"—but even as she spoke Olivia was conscious of the insincerity of her indifference. It did matter, it mattered vitally, and she knew that Ambrose felt as she did. He would not allow the Thatchers or any one else to stand between him and her, to prevent by any evil machinations his presenting himself that day at The Willow House.

And she hated to talk about him, she only wanted to think about him. Directly her husband had crept softly away, subduing his heavy tread almost to inaudibility and closing the door as though it were that of a sick room, she sat up in bed, and gazed through the open window at the green trees and sunshine outside.

It seemed a shame not to be already out of doors—and yet what could she do out of doors that could not be done within? She was not fit for work; her brain was busy, but hands and arms felt weak and nerveless. The effort of rising and dressing was a bugbear, and there was nothing to rise and dress for—till five o'clock.

Then Laurette appeared with a tray, demurely sympathetic, adjuring Madame to lie still and rest herself, shaking her head over Madame's so pale and fagged-out countenance.

"Late hours never do suit me, Laurette."

"*Assurément non*," said Laurette, decidedly. As to the satin dress, *Dieu merci!* it was only on the train where doubtless it had lain on the dewy grass, that it was discoloured.

"Figure to yourself how wonderful that the so ugly stain stops short, precisely where it would have been impossible to cut it off," cried the girl, triumphantly; *mais moi*, I have already put in the pins, and when I cut with the scissors, the train will be one little three or four inches shorter at the very, very back, and at the sides not at all. It is marvellous; Madame will see no change in her beautiful satin robe."

"Show it me when it's done," said Olivia, absently. "I know how clever you are with your fingers, Laurette."

"*Mais oui*, what am I for? And Madame goes out so little"—but Madame cut the chatter short.

"Take away everything but the tea and toast, Laurette; I can't look at other foods in this weather. Take the butter too, and don't come till I call."

"Shall I close the shutters? Is the light too strong for Madame?"

"No, no. I only want to be quiet." And the departing Laurette had a vision of a white figure extended motionless, whose listless arm was nowhere near the breakfast tray, and Laurette was very sure that dinner-parties were not good for her mistress.

Nevertheless, it is but due to Olivia to record that her ruminations were not altogether such as our readers may have been led to expect. If she had been fascinated

by Philip Ambrose, it was for reasons explicable to herself; and though conscious of a reluctance to enter into these with others, she argued that in themselves they were justifiable. Whatever might appear, there could be no real harm in feeling pleased and honoured by his singling her out as one to whom a higher style of conversation could be addressed than to the Thatchers, or Willie, or probably any others who might have been present on the previous evening. The swiftness with which Ambrose had recognised her right to meet him on equal ground could not but be delightful; she would have been less than human if she had not felt it so; there could be no confounding of this with an ordinary vulgar flirtation.

Besides, she was going to be an author, and for authors who sought to teach, to elevate, to ennoble, it was an incalculable boon to be in touch with kindred minds. What folly then for any weak scruple to have curtailed a *tête-à-tête* of such importance to her unwritten pages, what waste of a golden opportunity had she risen at Lady Fanny's hint, and missed, and it may be, lost for ever the full fruition of the hour.

She had an instinctive conviction that Ambrose was not a man who often let himself go as he had done with her. And it might be that this was because she was sensible of being herself unlike herself with him. There had been revelations on both sides which had fused into each other.

Olivia had heard her own voice saying what she had never heard it say before, and that in response to something in his which it was borne in on her was also new. Perhaps Colonel Thatcher was not so very far wrong when he talked as he did presently of "That damned Soul and Affinity business" which was the beginning of hum-hum-hum—and had Olivia Seaford been other

than the woman she was, she would have recognised his perspicuity.

As it was, she only wanted to be again thrilled and kindled and inspired as she had been the evening before. Such sensations had hitherto only come to her through books, and books are but a poor echo of living tones and glances.

While these were still vibrating upon the inmost chords of her being she had longed to fly to her desk, and dash down, fast as pen could do, sentiments and phrases, fearful lest they should escape her memory—but since that could not be, she had, in the wakeful hours of the night, repeated them over and over, finding fresh and vagrant inspirations springing from each source, till the whole was in a tumult and she was fain to let all go if only sleep would come instead.

It was grievous that now, when the time had come for which she erst had longed, the desire had flown. She had literally no energy to gather her errant wits together for the task that had then seemed no task at all. She even shrank from transcribing any part of a conversation which after all was not for the world but for herself.

It would, of course, influence her book indirectly, so much was indubitable; but it would be more delicate, more dignified to—to— “I shan’t write to-day,” decided she, finally. “I shall wait till I have so assimilated his thoughts with my own that I can give them out again as my own. Besides I am not in the mood,”—and that settled the matter.

By the afternoon lassitude had given way to renewed anticipation and some degree of excitement. Olivia rose and put on her prettiest summer frock, ate a little, read a little, gardened a little; found everything tiresome after it was begun, and every place the wrong place directly it was reached.

She had half expected a visit from Kitty, and fancied the prospect distasteful—but once or twice there was an eager listening when any unusual sound occurred, and a faint sense of disappointment when there was no result. Kitty might as well have run over to say what the rest were doing, and talk over things generally. “She can always come when there is nothing to tell,” muttered Olivia, “not that I exactly want her, but still ——” and she found herself accounting in various ways for Kitty’s absence.

Could it be due to parental prohibition? Could that silly old colonel have been objectionable and idiotic as he was last night? If so, there was no saying what disagreeable things might not have passed which loyal Kitty preferred to keep to herself; and knowing how difficult this would be in Olivia’s presence, she might have voluntarily elected to refrain from seeking it. But Ambrose would come, he would certainly come—she raised her eyes and Ambrose stood upon the balcony with Kitty by his side.

They were before their time—to be correct, he was before his time—and as for his companion? Somehow Olivia had never dreamed of this conjunction.

She was so taken aback that for a few seconds she simply stared and stood still.

The two were laughing and talking; laughing and talking as gaily and unconcernedly as if their arrival were the most natural thing in the world, not in the least as though the moment were one for which another person had been waiting and longing and preparing all through the tedious hours of the day.

Olivia had superintended the disposal of her small encampment in the shade, and caused it to be altered more than once. She had an eye for pictorial effects.

With her own hands she had bedecked the tea-table,

gathering for it her choicest and sweetest blossoms. And she had thrown about a book or two—books of a select order—and a red parasol lay upon the turf, and she herself in her cool, flowing muslin was conscious of making a pretty spot of colour against the surrounding green. Ambrose, hot and dusty from his walk along the glaring high road, should come all at once upon an enchanting oasis, and supposing that he, too, had dragged through a wearisome period beforehand with his inward eyes fixed upon this point, it should satisfy him.

And now it fell flat, the whole thing. The merriment of the pair upon the balcony grated upon her ears, in particular the man's jolly "Ha—ha—!" What was there to laugh about?

Olivia was a serious person, who herself laughed but rarely, and that only when she was genuinely amused; she found nothing humorous in the present moment, was never less inclined for jesting, and a frown hovered on her brow.

In short, she was in the mood of the previous evening, while Ambrose had passed into another, and the effect was as if she had received a slap in the face.

"We gave them the slip at home," cried Kitty, running down the steps; "it was such fun. They are all gone off to Hay Hill by water, and we said we'd walk. We did not exactly say *where*; and when it's all over, no one can blame us for finding it too far to that tiresome, stupid Hay Hill."

"As you were so good as to allow me to call," subjoined Ambrose, in the same cheerful note, "I confided to Miss Kitty that I knew we should find you at home."

"I am always at home at this time," replied Olivia, quietly.

“But she doesn’t always let people in,” nodded Kitty, proud of her footing at The Willow House. “If you had come alone,” she turned to Ambrose, “you would never have got past Thomas. Thomas knows it is as much as his place is worth to admit anybody but me without special orders”—and she smiled all round, and Olivia responded to the smile and did not say that the special orders had been given.

She was enraged at herself, and keenly anxious not to betray herself. Philip Ambrose had come to her as to an ordinary acquaintance who had made an agreeable impression—she recalled that this was Willie’s view of the case, though it had not been hers—and even as she led the way across the lawn she heard herself telling Willie about the call, and telling him more easily than she had expected to do!

“What a beautiful garden you have here,” said Ambrose, casting his eyes about.

“Oh, Olivia’s garden!” exclaimed Kitty, ecstatically.

“It is your hobby, is it not?” pursued Ambrose. “Miss Kitty told me as we came along that you made a perfect hobby of it. I know nothing about flowers, but I should say, if such an absolute ignoramus may presume to have an opinion at all, that you are richly rewarded for your pains. Your display is brilliant.”

Now what was there in this encomium that jarred upon Olivia? She herself could not have told, and yet she was conscious of vaguely protesting against its brisk outspokenness, and of having hoped for something different. Her garden was to her such a sacred spot, so peopled with creatures of the imagination, so full of subtle, sweet delight, so interwoven with her deepest and tenderest feelings, that to hear it called a “Hobby” was bad enough in itself, but the further phrase “A brilliant display” applied to her beloved roses and

geraniums, the cultivation of which was well-nigh a passion with her, was even worse.

For a few moments, indeed, she felt as if the speaker's power over her was broken. A man who could thus express himself could hardly be the man she had taken Philip Ambrose for. Even Willie would have spoken more reverently and sympathetically.

He proceeded, however, all unconscious. "This is a fine soil for flower-growing, I daresay, though I am told it does not suit all kinds. I have a friend who has the most desperate struggles with—but upon my word I forget what it is which baffles him. Some particular shrubs—possibly rhododendrons—but don't laugh at my ignorance if I am wrong—will not stand a chalky soil, and my poor friend moans and groans, though he has a very ornamental garden in other respects."

"Ornamental!" Olivia winced afresh. She had a fastidious dislike of certain words, and "Ornamental" was one.

"Our rhododendrons do very well," she observed, coldly.

"Everything does well with Olivia," struck in Kitty. She knew Olivia's face, and wondered that Mr. Ambrose should call forth its present expression. "You will take us round presently, won't you?" she ran on. "We are come to stay, and we want to see everything—and oh, Olivia, have my buddings taken, have *any* of them taken? If only one or two——"

"What buddings?" queried Olivia. Her tone was almost haughty; she was really in pain as she spoke.

"Why, those I got for you from Paul's," cried Kitty in astonishment. "I must see for myself"—she sprang up. "Just one moment and I shall be back,"—and away she flew.

"You may go or come, you may be away a moment

or an hour, it is the same to me now," reflected her friend, but the thought had scarce flashed through her brain ere she caught it back, as it were, and threw it aside.

"What would I not have given to come here alone?" It was a new voice that breathed softly in Olivia's ear. "I had set my heart on a resumption of our delightful converse of last night; we left so many things untouched, there was so much ground yet to be broken, that it would have been an untold pleasure to take up the thread in this exquisite seclusion, with nothing to spoil the harmony of the hour; but it was impossible"—he looked significance, and shook his head. "I felt you would understand," he murmured.

"My husband bade me say how sorry he was to miss you," stammered she. It was a reply which was no reply, but Olivia was scarce conscious of what she was saying.

"And so am I sorry, and it will always be a pleasure to meet Mr. Seaford, but how about the old proverb?" said Ambrose, smiling boldly. "'Two's company, three's none,' you know. To tell the truth, I hoped that your husband might be here, and that Miss Kitty, eh? Then we could have talked undisturbed. Suppose——?" he leaned a little nearer.

"Suppose?" echoed she, looking at him.

"Suppose we send her home?"

• • • • •
 "What's this? You here? Where's Ambrose?" Colonel Thatcher had not accompanied the party to Hay Hill, and, finding what he took to be an empty house on returning from his own peregrinations, to his surprise stumbled upon his eldest daughter curled up in a window-seat. "Didn't you go with the rest?" demanded he, rather anxiously. "Anything wrong?"

"Only that it was so very hot we really could not walk so far."

"So you gave it up?—quite right. I thought it was a mad idea. Where's Ambrose?"

"He has not come in yet."

"Have you had tea?"

"Oh, yes, thank you, long ago. We"—but the words stuck in Kitty's throat. With her co-delinquent at her side to give his easy version of the case, there had seemed nothing worse than a passing shade on her father's brow when he should learn that the two had "Taken refuge," as they had elected to term it, at The Willow House, but alone her courage failed her. She hardly knew how to say that she had left her companion with her friend, and had a faint hope that the avowal might be delayed, if not averted.

"He'll come in when he's tired," observed Colonel Thatcher, placidly. "I saw he was not very keen on that Hay Hill business, which, between ourselves, was a very poor notion on your mother's part. A confoundedly long pull up-stream to begin with, and nothing to do or to see when you get there. Call it a 'Hill'? There's no hill, only a hump; and such view as there is from the top, will be hidden in haze on a day like this."

He was turning away, but Kitty stopped him. "You don't mind our having gone to the Seafords instead, then?" Her heart beat a little, but she was not going to be a coward.

"To the Seafords!" The retreating figure came to an instantaneous standstill.

"We knew Olivia would be at home and glad to see us," faltered Kitty.

"Olivia? You took Ambrose to see Olivia, you little—he asked you, I suppose?"—suddenly.

"We agreed together to go," murmured she, evasively. "We thought it would be nice. Was there any reason why we shouldn't, father?"

But though there was a touch of defiance in the last words, not a little to Kitty's surprise, they did not elicit the expected outburst. She looked at her father, and he was looking at her.

To himself he was ejaculating angrily: Reason? There was every reason, every reason indeed, why a daughter of his should not be made the catspaw of two unprincipled persons, should not play into their hands and carry on their game,—but he looked again at the unconscious young face, so pure, so innocent, and bit his lip in silence.

"Is there any reason?" repeated Kitty, gathering courage.

"No." He forced himself to say "No," but it was a husky, unnatural monosyllable.

"There isn't?" Her rejoinder rang out shrilly. "Then why——?"

"Why what?"

"Why should you look so glum upon it?" laughed Kitty, jumping up and coming towards him. "I thought you were going to thunder at me; and, father, I did feel rather guilty, because I knew in my heart you would not like our going; but since you own yourself there was nothing against it—and yet you still look put out?"—scrutinizing his countenance with a perplexity that might any moment pass into comprehension.

He felt he must dispel it. "It was a foolish idea that of deserting the rest of your party and making a separate expedition, my dear. Your mother had got up the whole thing for Ambrose, and he might at least have told her—but no matter. He did not think of it. Not being a family man, he does not know the fuss it is

to get a party under way, and would have no idea his going or not was of any consequence. Oh, it's no matter, none at all, child" —patting her shoulder affectionately; "you were not to blame anyhow; and, as I say, Ambrose would never give it a thought. I was a little taken aback, that was all. Olivia Seaford is not generally so civil to our visitors. She had told him she would be at home, eh?" —carelessly.

"Yes, father, last night."

"Last night? I daresay. On the lawn; and Ambrose—well, well—he ought hardly to have made his own arrangements without reference to us, but I suppose he thinks he is a great man and can do as he pleases. In my young days people were more punctilious, and even now I fancy—I hate to be nasty to people behind backs—but I must say, this Oxford don is a trifle too free and easy for my taste. I was brought up in a different school"—and the colonel straightened his back.

"He is a little masterful," owned Kitty, after a minute's hesitation. "I suppose it is as you say, that he is so accustomed to ordering people about without being hampered by——"

"Hampered by good breeding, eh?" ("Thank Heaven, *she's* not caught by him, at any rate," chuckled the colonel within himself. "I don't fancy Master Ambrose as a son-in-law.")

"You haven't said how it came about that you left him behind?"—suddenly he bethought himself of this, which Kitty had hoped might be overlooked.

"Oh, he—he just stayed, father."

"You made your call and had the sense to come home, and he hadn't the manners to come with you?"

"It wasn't exactly that. They——" But she could think of nothing to add to her "They".

"They shunted you?" supplied he. "You found yourself in the way? One too many?"

"Olivia does always like to have one person rather than two, father, especially when she is showing off her garden. And you see the garden isn't new to me, as it is to Mr. Ambrose; and it is rather stupid to have some one listening who knows all about it when you are showing anything off to some one else who doesn't. I suggested, quite of myself, that I had things to do at home, and Mr. Ambrose did kind of offer to come, and asked if I minded going alone,—but I told him I went and came along that road every day, and laughed at the idea."

"You have been back some time?"

"Ye—es," owned Kitty, reluctantly. She had been watching for the recreant's return for over an hour, hoping that he would escape the interrogations of others by being in before them.

"I daresay Seaford has arrived from town, and Ambrose would stop on to talk to him," observed the colonel, mildly. He was conscious of having been on the verge of indiscretion a minute before. "I'll go along the road and see if any of them are coming? I may even go to the house. Seaford brings down the evening paper, and there is something in it I want to see."

But it was Seaford and not the paper he wanted to see, or rather he was curious to discover if Seaford were actually there or not.

"I'm a suspicious old fox, I suppose," ruminated he, as he tramped along; "but, upon my word, I shan't quite clear madam unless I see fat Willie sitting on the lawn. Even then—confound it, I daresay the whole thing is a mare's nest, but it has taken hold of me, and for my life I can't get rid of it. I don't like the woman—that's to say, she's attractive enough and has got a head on her shoulders, but she exasperates me, and it's

possible I do her injustice ;” and when he espied a party of three in front of The Willow House, and noted that Willie Seaford was without hat or stick or newspaper, and had the air of a man cooled down and comfortable, he shook his old head at himself again.

“ I’m a regular suspicious old fox. India plays the very devil with a man’s faith in womanhood. I ought to be ashamed of attributing to a decent English girl the tricks of those hussies out there, just because she has a little mild flirtation right under the eye of old friends, and that with a respectable man of position who would no more be beguiled into any real mischief than I should myself. Well, now, I am glad I was careful with Kitty,” he wound up, and saluted the trio in his best manner.

“ Come to look for you ” (to Ambrose) ; “ Kitty told me where you were to be found, and I guessed Seaford would be home by now too. Brought a paper down ? ” (to him). No one had ever seen the old soldier in more genial vein.

The paper was in the house and would be fetched directly, but meantime Colonel Thatcher’s opinion was wanted about something else.

“ It’s about the Berrys,” explained Willie ; “ you can tell Mr. Ambrose about them, for you knew them, which we didn’t. At least I knew the little chap well enough, and we often had a chat,—but Olivia thought it wasn’t worth while bothering to call on his wife, as they were only here for so short a time. However, you liked them, didn’t you, sir ? And they told you and Lady Fanny they were jolly comfortable at the cottage, didn’t they ? ”

“ The Berrys ? I believe so. Never heard it if they weren’t. Did you know them ? ”—the colonel turned to Ambrose. “ You should have told us ; though, by the way, they left last week.”

"That's it, they've left, and the rooms are free," struck in Willie. "Mr. Ambrose thinks of taking them."

"No, I did not know your friends," explained Ambrose, more collectedly, "but I am on the look-out for some little quiet nook where I could work in peace for the next two months, and Mr. Seaford thinks this cottage which we were just going to see when you approached, might suit me."

"Pump Cottage? Aye, I daresay it might." But the colonel undeniably looked a little blank. He had been gratified by the offer of a visit from the famous Oxford scholar; he had strained his mental acumen to its utmost to cope with his distinguished guest, and for three days had thought and talked of nothing else—but now, now just when he was secretly conscious of looking forward to a relaxation of effort, and to enjoying the *éclat* of having entertained Ambrose, with Ambrose safely off the field, this sudden move was perhaps the last thing desired.

Willie, however, was radiant. "I tell him he might search England through and he wouldn't find a prettier spot, nor a nicer old couple to take him in and do for him. The sitting-room is at the back. He would not even see people in the lane—though for that matter few enough go by, for it's a beast of a lane in winter and leads to nowhere in summer. What are you laughing at, Olivia?"

"Nothing," laughed she. "We all know what you mean, Willie."

"It does lead nowhere—oh, I see. But of course no one would want to go along a lane knee-deep in mud, so that it's only when the mud's dry and caked as it is now, that you find out what a sell that lane is. Lands you in a cow-shed, and even its gate is locked."

"That's all right," said Ambrose, cheerfully. "From

what you say I am convinced I have found the very place I am in search of, so now shall we stroll down and see it?" Unconsciously he was assuming the lead of the party, but he looked towards Olivia as he spoke, and Olivia's reply was something of a surprise to all.

"I don't think I shall go. I feel lazy. And, Willie, you know the old people better than I do; you go with Mr. Ambrose, and perhaps Colonel Thatcher will stay here with me?"

"My husband has a mania for finding quarters for people," pursued she, when her arrangement having been adopted, she found herself alone with the colonel; "he can't hear of anybody's wanting a moor, or a villa, or even an hotel, without running over in his mind the names of all he has ever heard of. Nothing pleases him better than to be directly asked to recommend one, but even when he is not asked, he hurries to tell."

"Ambrose came to the right person, then," said Colonel Thatcher, as cordially as he could. "Or did your husband suggest Pump Cottage in the first instance? I know he has been talking about it."

"It was quite a vexation to him that it should stand empty even for this week," laughed Olivia. "It was terrible to Willie that there might be people who would give the world to know of such a spot, and that he had no means of telling them." But she did not say he had suggested it to Ambrose.

As a matter of fact the idea had sprung up as it were of itself, having its precise origin neither in Olivia's mind nor in that of her companion whom it most affected. They both inclined to be together, and alike felt that fate was cruel in having brought them into communion for so brief a space, and Ambrose put this into words.

"And now I am going, and when shall we meet

again?" said he, with a sigh. "My lonely life must be taken up afresh, and you will forget all about me in your happier lot."

"Oh, you will come here every now and then, I suppose." Olivia tried to speak with cheerful unconcern, though she too felt depressed and dejected as the hour of parting drew near. "You are a free man, you go where you will; and considering that we live in the same county, is it so very unlikely that we should run across each other sometimes?"

"I must get to work, you know; and while my work ties me down to the proximity of a musty library and a goading publisher, you will be off to—where are you going for the autumn?"—he broke off to ask.

"Nowhere, we don't go away at the time other people do," replied she. "Willie shoots for a few weeks in Scotland; he joins a man's shooting party, but I wait till the holiday rush is over. These breezy hillsides are pleasant enough and healthy enough even in sultry August, and I could not face long journeys to get elsewhere till the cooler weather sets in."

"You would be here through August?" He leaned forward, breathing quickly.

"I always am. I would not be anywhere else for the world."

"Then—then—but the Thatchers will be away;" he paused, his brain obviously at work. "I had thought of—but I have nothing fixed—and it would be near enough to Oxford—and quiet—and as you say, healthy—Mrs. Seaford, I am wondering."

"And I am wondering what about?"—smiled she.

"Could I—would it be possible for me to find—what about rooms in some village near here?"—he regarded her intently, feeling his way.

"There is no village near, I am afraid, Mr. Ambrose." A thought had arisen in her mind, but she did not blurt it out as Willie would, she waited to have it drawn from her.

"But there are farmhouses, cottages?"

"Would you be content with a cottage?"

"I should be content with anything in this lovely country, and with such friends at hand. You can't think what a difference it would make to me if I might have you and Mr. Seaford to come and see, what a refreshment at the close of a day's work to say to myself, 'Now for The Willow House!' But perhaps"—again he strove to read her face—"perhaps I should be a nuisance?" "It is too bad thus to propose fastening myself upon people who yesterday were absolute strangers, but who to-day—no, forgive me, I am too impulsive."

"We are honoured, Mr. Ambrose."

"Believe me, it is not my habit to make such sudden friendships," said he, earnestly; "and I can only say in my own excuse that never before have I been so tempted. Your ideal life—but let us return to—to what we were talking about." He broke off with a slight confusion of countenance.

"If you could put up with a very, very humble abode," said Olivia, quietly, "I believe there is one"—and at that moment her husband emerged from the house. He had not been able to shake off the impression that a later return would be discourteous to the expected guest, and now hailed the latter with joy. When he heard of the proposal under discussion moreover, his reception of it was rapturous, and we know the rest.

The gentlemen returned from their exploring ex-

pedition with the matter settled, and Willie's hat waving directly he caught sight of the others. "Permit me to present to you the tenant of Pump Cottage"—he flourished his arm towards Ambrose, and Ambrose steadily kept his eyes away from Olivia.

CHAPTER VII.

“HE DOES FAG YOU RATHER.”

AND now opened a new chapter in Olivia Seaford's life.

She had been married for six years—six smooth, luxurious, eventless years—and, had she been still the fragile girl she was when these began, it is quite possible that an interminable vista of the same would have satisfied her in the future as it had in the past.

But her health had improved and her mind developed. For some time she had been conscious of occasional bursts of energy, and even of very occasional twinges of discontent.

Habit, however, was too strong for both; and there was also always the fear lest anything should be said or done to open her husband's eyes, when he would infallibly propose remedies—and Willie's remedies!—Olivia shuddered at them.

Even for herself she was not sure of what she wanted, but she was quite sure it would not be what he wanted. It was safer and easier and better in every way to keep on as they were; it might be terribly dangerous to deviate from the rose-strewn path.

But the installation of Philip Ambrose at the cottage in the lane had in it nothing alarming, and necessitated no change in the leisurely, tranquil, everyday life at The Willow House. Its mistress would not even need to seek him out now and then as she must have done had

he been a woman. He was there, and made free of the Seafords' domain. He was not to be treated ceremoniously, invited at set hours to meals, and barred entrance at other times. He was to enter by the side door; to lift the latch and walk in. "And when you don't see me, look about and find me," said Olivia. "And, I say, I'm always at home by six, except on 'Thursdays,'" added Willie.

They equally looked upon Ambrose as their production, almost as their tenant: Pump Cottage belonged to Mr. Seaford, and was only let for a term of years to his cowman—so that the cowman's lodgers might certainly be regarded by his landlord as in a manner tenants also.

"That is what I tried to make you see about the Berrys," quoth Willie to his wife; "and I always thought it rather rough on the Berrys that you wouldn't."

He was, however, so pleased that the newcomer was not to be on the Berry level, that except for the above he was willing to let bygones be bygones, and Olivia found something to say in answer even to it.

"A man and a woman are different from a man by himself," observed she, oracularly. "We should have had to entertain the Berrys, and I should have been forced to go and see her, and it would have been an infliction altogether."

"Aye, there's something in that," agreed he; "but all the same if Berry had been alone, eh, Olivia?"—and he tried to catch her eye laughing, and when she laughed too, needed no other answer.

He was distinctly elated by Olivia's attitude towards Ambrose.

"Those kind of chaps are her sort and no mistake," he told himself. "She regularly revels in his high-falutin style of conversation, and he has the sense to

see she can tackle it. Well, I'm glad Olivia has got some one to talk to at last,"—and he prepared for his August shooting with a lighter heart than he would have done if Pump Cottage had stood empty.

His shooting was the one thing he could not give up, and Olivia had always been rather kind about it.

In her heart she knew how little he asked for, how much he gave; and though she missed them—and hung about him before he went—and welcomed him back almost with tears of joy—she never tried to prevent his going.

To ease his mind on her account she would even provide herself with a companion during his absence—but there was usually so much to complain of in the latter when he came home, such tales to tell of her dullness and tactlessness, such an evident sense of her having been a burden to flesh, soul, and spirit, that, though hugely delighted with the contrast drawn in his favour, and with her "Oh, Willie, dear, it *is* good to have you home again," he grew to dread the ordeal through which his poor Olivia must yearly pass, before she could throw herself on his broad breast at its close.

"But now you will have Ambrose," said he, with a smack of the lips (one of his offences). "I don't know if you are thinking of having any one in the house or not?"—and he paused inquiringly.

"I suppose you think I must?" said she. She was wondering what he did think.

"You would be lonesome in the evenings; they begin to creep in about the middle of the month; I don't like to think of you sitting alone in the drawing-room. I say, it does seem selfish going off and leaving you like this," suddenly he burst forth, thinking of the jolly company he was going to, of the glorious tramps over flood and fell, with the jovial dinners to follow; then the

stroll forth beneath the stars, or on a wet night, Bridge, and the keen quartette that knew all about each other's play. The other three were bachelors, but it may be questioned whether any one of them enjoyed the free life on the moor as much as did Willie Seaford, who had Olivia's image enshrined in his heart, and her photographs all over his little bedroom, and who prayed for her and blessed her every night ere he tumbled off to sleep on a hard bed that felt like down to his wearied limbs. "I feel a brute," he sighed now; "that is," he brightened up, "I should if you hadn't Ambrose. I assure you, darling, I very nearly gave up Scotland this year after hearing your experiences with Amelia Ping-Pong——"

"Oh, Willie!"

"I can't think of her name, what was it? Anyhow she doesn't come here again, and I was wondering a good deal as to whom to get?"

"But you needn't; you needn't worry: I can surely do *that* for myself," cried Olivia, half-vexed, half-laughing. "If only you would not spoil me, Willie, I might be good for something yet. As for Amelia Ping-Pong as you call her—her real name is Puttick——"

"Aye, I might have remembered. I said to myself 'Puttick and Simpson'."

"But she is no relation whatever of 'Puttick and Simpson'. Dear Willie, you are so very erratic in your conclusions; I daresay Puttick is a common name enough. And I was only going to say," proceeded Olivia, "that perhaps I was rather hard on poor Amelia. I was run down and out of spirits last autumn, and you were away longer than usual——"

"I promise you I shan't stay longer this year."

"Oh, I—I don't mean that—that's to say it would not be the same this year;" hesitated she.

"Any time you are feeling ill or moping, you know, you have only to send for me. Wire in the morning and I'll be here by the night. No, not quite that perhaps; but anyhow I'd take the first train south."

"I should not think of sending for you, Willie; I hope I am not that kind of woman. And I shall get along perfectly, only I don't know about having any one in the house." She pondered and resumed: "The hapless individuals who would put up with my vagaries for the sake of board and lodging aren't the interesting sort. They are the feeble, futile sort. The sort that say 'Oh, really?' and 'Indeed' when it isn't 'Dear, I never should have thought of that!' Poor Amelia was always telling me she 'Never would have thought of that,' when of course she wouldn't, she never thought of anything. I think I'll do without a satellite this year, Willie."

"You don't think——?" he paused.

"What?" She saw he had something on his mind. "It's only the Thatchers and people," said he, reluctantly. "They don't seem over-pleased about Ambrose coming to the cottage as it is; I fancy they feel as if we had nabbed—I mean stolen their man. He was theirs, you know; and now——"

"Well?" said Olivia smiling.

"I say, they don't seem to count for much with him, do they? When he heard that they would be away for most of his time here, he took it precious coolly. But if we, that is if you had been going, it would have been—he would never have come."

"We can't help that. Mr. Ambrose knows who suit him and who don't."

"And you suit him, and I want you to see as much of him as ever you can, but if he is hanging about here all day"—he stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"My dear Willie, he has come to the cottage to *work*. Hanging about? I should say Mr. Ambrose is the last man to hang about anywhere."

"He can't work for more than a certain amount of hours, and then he'll be up here like a shot. I know I should in his place."

"You yourself told him to come whenever he felt inclined."

"That's all right; I'm delighted he should; but if you had some one stopping with you, it would shut people's mouths. You know well enough what I mean, Olivia. There isn't a man and there isn't a woman living of whom things won't be said if they sit in each other's pockets. I know it's ridiculous in this instance, but we must take the world as we find it."

"Look here, Willie, I'll tell you what I'll do." Rather to his surprise she did not flame up, but nodded a meditative assent. "I'll have the Rushington boy. That poor Algy who found it 'So sad to be going back to Town,' " mimicking Mrs. Rushington's accents.

"I have had Algy more or less on my conscience ever since," resumed Olivia, when the laugh had subsided. "It seemed rather cruel to let him go, and watch his small white face diminishing to a speck in the distance. He alone never turned round as long as the motor was in sight; and if it had not been for his aggressive mother's persistency in trying to throw him into my lap, I could almost have held out my lap to him."

"So you are going to hold it out now?" Willie nodded contentedly, pleased with the turn things had taken, but careful as one who knew what brittle ice he had to tread upon. "Well, it might do, you know."

"Yes, it might do; that is what I think. He would fit the gap. And Willie, he is really a nice boy, and

loves the country. If you had seen his eyes glisten when I took him round my garden! He did not say much; he never put a silly question; but he quite seemed to *feel* it."

"Took your fetish as solemnly as you do yourself? That's the style, that's what fetched you. So if you don't think he would be in your way——?"

"—I am sure he wouldn't. Besides, one can order a boy about, one needn't be afraid of any *touchiness*. With Amelia I was always on the verge of giving offence."

"I see. It is a capital notion altogether, and I only hope it will work. People are beginning to go out of Town now, but the Rushingtons are there all right, for I saw him yesterday. No doubt they would be only too glad to deposit the boy here, instead of lugging him about with them, and they are regular rush-about. Rush-about-Rushingtons they ought to be called."

"Never satisfied to be still, always craving for excitement and change, the sort of people I detest," assented Olivia, with unction. "That poor boy will be far happier with me than with them."

"Of course he will. Shall I see Rushington about it? Or——?"—he paused suggestively.

"I will write," said she—and there was a world of significance in the simple words. A month before she would not have spoken them; she would have thrust the whole burden of the affair on to her husband's shoulders, and yawned in his face when he tried to tell her about it afterwards. But a new alertness, a new energy had come to her. She could enjoy an effort, and rebel against being saved one. Once she exclaimed, "It's you who make me such a cipher, Willie"—and Willie trod on air for an hour afterwards. It was the recollection of this petulance which prompted his "Or?" and look of interrogation; instinct told him

that Olivia was not going to be made a cipher of on the present occasion.

"You will write, eh? Then I needn't do anything. You will manage it all for yourself, and do it a deal better than I should. And it is most awfully good of you to bother with the boy——"

"—No, it isn't; it isn't good at all;" she threw out her hands at him in her own pretty petulant way. "I am merely making a convenience of Algy, because you think it as well that I should have somebody here while you are away;" she paused, and there was a faint suffusion in her cheek as she resumed, "I should never have thought of it but for what you said about Mr. Ambrose."

"You don't mean—hang it all, Olivia, you can't suppose I care if Ambrose is here every day and all day long? You needn't look as if I had affronted you. Have Algy Rushington or not, as you please, but don't put it on my thinking——"

"—But you did. You said people would talk."

"Well, yes, I said that and say it still, but what's talk?"

"Then why are we having Algy Rushington?"

They were on the brink of a quarrel.

But the next moment they were laughing at each other. "The idea of your thinking I could be jealous, ha, ha, ha!" cried he, enjoying the joke with the full power of his lusty lungs. "You little humbug, as if I don't know you in and out, and ha, ha, ha! it is the rummest notion that."

"Ha, ha, ha!" chimed in she, gaily. "You have one saving merit, you dear old blunderbuss, you do understand your wife, which very few people do. As for making you jealous, you know I simply loathe that disgusting kind of folly. Still, for the sake of those

noodles who don't, and who would like very well to purse up their lips at one—we'll have Algy Rushington."

"Aye, we'll have Algy Rushington," assented he.

And the note was despatched by the next post, and Olivia was especially gay and sweet that evening, and so sure of herself and pleased with every one else that she sang aloud as she stepped about among her flower-beds, doing their nightly watering.

She was afraid of nothing, disturbed about nothing; she foresaw a pleasant time instead of a dreary one while Willie was away; and whereas hitherto she had always been glad when August was over, now August itself was to bring her many happy hours.

The companionship of Philip Ambrose would be elevating and inspiring, but it steadied her in her own esteem to find that he did not on closer acquaintance always please her. He was deficient in matters of taste; he lacked imagination, poetry, sentiment—and she fancied despised them in others. Then his manners were uncertain; he was not invariably polite even towards herself, while he could be openly indifferent to the feelings of others for whom he did not profess the same regard.

He was impatient of contradiction, even of slow assent. Those he was with must agree at once, instantaneously, to any view he took of a case, or he brow-beat them. Once or twice Olivia felt obliged to excuse to herself certain roughnesses which rose to the surface now that its first gloss had worn off. She even told herself that Willie would never have spoken so.

As for Mr. Ambrose's personal appearance, it was certainly remarkable, but she found many flaws in it. His hair was too thin, his mouth too large, and she could never forget that Kitty disliked his long neck.

Her husband might be broad and stout, but his

mighty frame was firmly knit and his limbs were hard with muscle. Ambrose was loosely jointed, and had ungainly attitudes. He might not fold his hands across his waistcoat—indeed he had no waistcoat to speak of—but he sprawled, and twisted one leg round the other, and generally did not look his best when in the heat of conversation.

On the other hand, how delightful, how wonderful could such conversation be! Olivia really possessed the powers of mind wherewith she accredited herself. It was a pity that she was so conscious of them, but they were there, and enabled her to rise without an effort into the world where Philip Ambrose was at home and great.

With almost feverish delight she drank in new thoughts and ideas; and her reading, having been varied and extensive, had prepared the ground for the reception of these even on subjects that surprised her teacher. "You see my books have been my life," said she—and then tried to explain away the admission, while he applauded it.

"You could not assimilate new theories as you do, if you had not given much time and attention to study. I cannot imagine why you should wish to deny that you have."

"Because it is to no end. If I were like you and could give it out again——"

"Oh, that is not a woman's place," said Ambrose, loftily.

He found Olivia fitting the very niche a woman should—able to appreciate but not to rival man, her master; to talk to her was to gauge the effect of his words upon the world; to watch for the light in her eye which told that a problem had been solved or an argument hit the mark, was like waiting for the nods of his compeers.

"She will be invaluable to me," he decided, when he had been up to The Willow House once or twice after taking up residence at the cottage, and while Willie Seaford was yet coming and going, with the day of his departure a week off; "and he is an acquisition too, with his excellent wines and cigars. A thorough earthworm, but a good earthworm,"—and he lit one of the earthworm's cigars with satisfaction.

Once Olivia noticed that her husband was handled, so to speak, gingerly by fingers that did not scruple to snap at others, and she felt a blush of anger as she divined why; he was under-rated, he was not worth crushing, and he had good cigars. She tried to make Willie talk big next time their friend was by, but poor Willie made rather a mess of it, and Olivia fancied Ambrose sneered. She rose and left them.

"I say, did I make a fool of myself?" said Willie, later. "I really was not such an ass as I seemed; I knew perfectly well what you were at, but I was so anxious not to put my foot in it and vex you, that it made me jolly nervous, and I just went and did it."

"I'm sure it was simple enough, Willie."

"I daresay—to you. But I'm a slow chap, and Ambrose darts about like lightning. By the time I've caught up with him I look an ass."

"And you are not an ass, and that was what I wanted to show him. You are not transcendently clever, but when you have time to think——"

"Aye, that's it, give me time and let me chew the cud—but don't startle me or I'm done for. Ambrose springs an idea upon a fellow, and expects him to grab it without a moment's hesitation. However, you seem to be able to do this," he paused admiringly.

"I suppose I was born so, Willie."

"Just so, some people are. Some are and some

aren't;” profoundly. “But you didn't really mind, did you? I say, I'll get a book and read it up if you like?”

But he never got the book, nor was his knowledge of it put to the test.

And then the “Twelfth” drew near, and husband and wife kissed “Good-bye,” and the same dogcart that conveyed the former to the station, brought back his substitute in the shape of Algy Rushington. As foreseen, no difficulties were raised in the shape of Algy's coming, and there he was, and there was Mrs. Seaford waiting for him at the front door. “And a deal better him than one of them dratted companion-women,” asseverated the servants—and “A harmless nonentity,” pronounced Ambrose—and things settled themselves down on this basis at The Willow House.

Only Colonel Thatcher put out his lips, and muttered beneath his moustache, while Lady Fanny was not sorry that Kitty was away, and hoped that the whole episode would be over and done with ere the neighbourhood proper re-assembled in the autumn.

“I wish, however, I dared give Olivia the hint,” murmured she. But she did not dare.

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And from a dispassionate point of view, looking at Olivia simply as Olivia, without reference to whys and wherefores, there could be no doubt that she improved bodily and mentally in an astonishing way during the weeks that followed.

Her languor, her self-absorption, her indulgence of every whim and fancy often to the inconvenience, if not to the actual distress, of others, were replaced by an activity, cheerfulness, and sweet reasonableness which none could fail to notice.

The servants found their mistress considerate, a fact unknown in their annals hitherto. Their modest de-

mands were promptly met, and what surprised them still more was a certain measure of interest taken in their concerns which had never before been manifested.

Not that Olivia had ever been disliked by her household, quite the contrary. She never interfered, nor scolded, nor pryed into the life below stairs; but all around her were her serfs, her slaves—not human beings with whom she could have any fellow-feeling—not men and women whose joys and sorrows could excite her interest or sympathy.

It was said that she did not know some of them by sight, but this was probably an exaggeration; nevertheless Anne and Eliza were content to be regarded as the Anne and Eliza of The Willow House, whose separate existence, if they had such a thing, was an unknown quantity to their employer.

The present Olivia even remembered that the little kitchen scrub had been away for her holiday when a curtsy was dropped her on the stairs one day, and hoped that Emma had enjoyed herself? She visited the coachman's wife, who had had a baby, and allowed the rest of the children the use of the station cart for their summer treat, calling Algy to watch the little pack drive off. "Like a nest of birds," she said.

Algy found his hostess all that was amiable and simple. In no time he learnt her ways and respected them, divined her feelings and shared them, and was often furious with Ambrose—but let us return to Ambrose.

To him, of course, the above alteration in Olivia Seaford was due. On the evening when the two first met, he had indeed been struck, nay he had been absolutely subjugated by her charms, but as time went on every subsequent meeting revealed that while he still admired, and was willing, boldly, almost coarsely, to let

it be seen that he did so, he expected a *quid pro quo*. He would whisper adulation, but he must have adulation back. Where he bestowed notice he demanded subservience.

And gradually the latter scale descended in the balance. He gave less and exacted more. He was annoyed if any one were looked at or listened to but himself. His eyes would flash round for Olivia the instant he entered a circle, and if she were not there, betray it a desert—while it was worse still if she were, and were not instantly at his service. In that case his stern lips would scarce unseal themselves—while yet again if her attention wandered, were it but for a moment, during which he held forth to an audience, it mattered not who was listening, he stopped. Olivia, flurried and penitent, would have to stroke his ruffled plumage many times over ere she was forgiven.

And this for a woman who had never been told she was in the wrong in her life! This for one who had hitherto gone her dainty way untrammelled by the veriest gossamer thread of opposition! This for one who considered her every glance a gratuity, and bare tolerance a favour!

Yet, the fact remained that Olivia, rebuked, interrupted, obliged to suspend what she was doing and at the will of another lay aside not merely pen or trowel but the desire itself to wield them, was presently a familiar Olivia to the inmates of The Willow House.

Ambrose would hurry in so full of his own concerns, and so impatient to confide them, that he would arrive on the scene talking, barely touch her hand, and continue talking—her welcome—her bright face and pretty dress all thrown away upon him, and yet she durst not pout as she would have done with Willie.

Nor could she say she was busy, even though every

moment was precious, with a thunderstorm impending overhead! She feared the thunder on his brow more than that of Jove.

And of course she was flattered, honoured. With her own hands she had prepared his throne on the first occasion of his permitting it to be hoped he would deign to sit and write beneath their elms; and he had spoken then of the "Delicious shade," and the "Exquisite silence, broken only by the tap of the woodpecker or the chirp of the water-hen,"—but subsequently when the throne became a fixture, (consisting of the easiest chair in Willie's smoking-room, together with his low table, his tantalus, and two bottles of his particular soda water), it appeared that the arrangement was not complete unless there were a chair for Olivia, too. He *must* have her—she *must* come.

"You do help me so wonderfully," said he, in a good mind; "I have never before had any one to whom I could read my manuscript before sending it up; for of course one does not care to let one's ideas filter abroad through one's friends in the same line, and they would be Greek and Latin to the common herd."

"I am so proud to be of use," said she, humbly. But her eyes glistened. Who does not like to be set apart from the common herd?

And Olivia's weakest point was touched when Ambrose praised her understanding, and it was speeches such as the above which riveted his ascendancy over her when occasionally it loosened a little.

She had but to think, "These pages will be read in the farthest ends of the earth, they will be discussed by the greatest men of our time," to feel how mean and trifling was the spirit which would have grudged emptying itself to add one drop to the brimming fount whence genius flowed.

N.B.—*The Peculiar Book* was enriched by this sentiment, together with others of like nature, the entering of which never failed to soothe away any little sense of grievance on the part of O. S. the author in embryo.

There were days when she had it on her lips to tell Ambrose about *The Peculiar Book*—days when he was mild and approachable, having despatched "Copy" at which he had been working at high pressure while others slept.

"You know you ought not to work at night," Olivia would shake her head in a motherly way—but his answer would be prompt and sweet to her ear: "If I did not, I should never know the intensity of repose, the perfection of bliss it is to rest here with you."

His phrases were always magniloquent, but magniloquence addressed to oneself does not sound foolish.

In such an idle hour there might be the opportunity so longed for, yet shrunk from, of producing her own little venture, and once the opportunity came so near as almost to touch her.

"What is that in your hand?" quoth Ambrose, lazily.

It was not precisely a common-looking book; Olivia could not, we know, have written in a common-looking book, and she had transmitted several sheets of the paper which Willie had had made for her, into a vellum-bound volume, with a lock and key and her monogram engraved on the clasp, and brought it with her.

"Oh, it's—a book," said she, the colour rising in her cheek. Surely he would ask what book?

"An album of sorts," rejoined he; "what a craze there used to be for albums in the days when people never wrote nor thought of anything worth putting into them. I have one of my mother's somewhere, full of the most awful drivel."

"What sort of drivel?" said Olivia, breathing fast, while her fingers held *The Peculiar Book* a little tighter.

"Birds and flowers and rubbish," said Ambrose, succinctly.

"I don't see why it need be 'Rubbish' because"—but the speaker stopped, little tremors running down her back. She might let slip her secret if warmed to argue, and all at once she felt she must guard her secret at any price. "Nature is not 'Rubbish,'" she wound up lamely.

"Certainly not, my dear lady, but what silly, sentimental creatures write about it, often is." He was now didactic and scornful. "Natural history is a study worthy any man's intellect, but to gush about 'The feathered songsters of the wood'——"

"—Which poets have done."

"And would-be poets think they can do—but they can't. They are simply mawkish." He twisted his legs and pursued the thought, perceiving nothing. "I have no patience with petty scribblers; what do they want to scribble for? To see their names in print, to make their friends stare, to feed their superabundant vanity——"

"No, no. You are too severe." Olivia tried to speak lightly. "Books which may not appeal to you may yet have something in them."

"If they had, they *would* appeal to me; I can appreciate merit wherever it is to be found," retorted he, somewhat nettled. "Poetry may not be my own line, but I can admire good poetry for all that. It is a mistake to suppose that one is blind to excellence because it happens to take a form—you cannot call me narrow-minded?"—he interrupted himself and looked for a disclaimer.

"We were not talking of excellence," murmured

Olivia, evasively. "I know your standard is very high," continued she, with an effort, "and perhaps it makes you—don't mind my saying so—a little intolerant. You want the best of everything."

"I do; yes, I do. Emphatically I do; and I would see the remainder swept from the face of the earth. For instance, your album there—it is an album, is it not?"

"Not exactly," she faltered, and let her handkerchief drop over it as if by accident; she was in terror now lest he should become curious.

"It is that kind of thing, at any rate. Oh, Mrs. Seaford, I thought better things of you. You are content with dross when you might have gold. You—let me see—I shall speculate as to what you have got there bound so elaborately, and clasped and locked too, ye gods! Oh, you blush, you blush," he laughed exultant; "your conscience pricks you. Isn't it so? You have a number of pretty little extracts written out in your own charming handwriting, arrayed in order and neatly indexed; and instead of offering your mind strong and strengthening food, you let it swim in pap——"

"At least I shan't inflict the pap upon you." Olivia rose and tried to smile, though her lips quivered a little. "And I think you are rather cruel, Mr. Ambrose. You would silence every voice that cannot give out great utterances. You do not consider that the little grasshoppers along the hedgerows can make pleasant sounds——"

"Oh, bother the grasshoppers!" said Ambrose, rudely.

But presently Olivia saw him coming after her as she made her way into the house, and she had barely time to huddle *The Peculiar Book* into her writing-table and shut and lock the drawer, ere he was in the room.

"Come to beg pardon," said he, like a sheepish school-boy. And of course he obtained the pardon, and Olivia felt afterwards as if she had had a cold bath and was all the better for it.

And she told herself that Ambrose could not possibly have suspected the pain he was giving, and that she had been unwarrantably sensitive to his strictures. He was so accustomed to writing in powerful and authoritative language, that insensibly he slid into the use of strong terms and phrases on inadequate occasions, and when the laceration of the victim was the last thing intended. He looked upon her now as his disciple, took pains with her, and felt an interest in her—naturally when he regarded her as in fault he spoke out plainly, and she ought not to have minded such speaking.

It hurt, but she could surely endure sharp medicine administered for her good. Nay, she would profit by it and *The Peculiar Book* should likewise profit by it.

She need not give up the book; she was not so completely impregnated with her master's wisdom as to consider his withering sarcasms a dead blight on it, but she would certainly be more careful and discriminating in future. She would eliminate certain passages—they rose before her as she mused—and reconstruct others. Perhaps—but she would not build on this—still perhaps even Philip Ambrose might not scorn some day what others found worthy of praise.

She discovered that he disliked women celebrities. "Of course, they do now and then attain eminence," conceded he, "but generally speaking, an ordinarily clever man can produce better work than an extraordinarily clever woman. I am not denying that the sex can possess great ability, occasionally genius; how could I in your presence?" (whereat Olivia dropped her eyes); "but I contend that she is not, or would be better not

to be, mentally productive. Her productions are not needed; they are superfluous; she should confine herself to the receptive and appreciative attitude, in which she shines."

"Also I presume to the domestic sphere," said Olivia, with a suspicion of irony in her tone.

"Why, yes, where there is a domestic sphere, but I was thinking rather—frankly I was thinking of yourself. You could not be condemned to running after servants, and teaching them how to beat carpets."

"Which they know much more about than I do."

"Precisely. You would be wasted; but on the other hand, should you in any fit of mental aberration conceive the idea of giving the public your views on subjects in general—not that I should ever for a moment suppose you would, but we will take it as a case in point—you would to my mind let yourself down from the high level on which you stand at present. You are gifted with remarkably acute powers of discernment—pray forgive my being personal, it is such a pleasure to say for once what one is always thinking—and your assimilative faculties are so keen and original, that you absorb my thoughts and apprehend my meanings as no one has ever done before. Now *that* I take to be the supreme attitude to which a woman can attain. It is—it is—the greatest enjoyment my life has ever known to be with you," he added, softly.

But once he took her by the arm. Olivia drew it away and walked on the other side of the path. It was some minutes before she spoke. And then she called Algy to her and kept the boy at her side for the remainder of the afternoon, despite the hints of Ambrose and the obvious fume upon his brow.

"What did you do that for?" he demanded reproachfully next day. "Why did you insist upon

plaguing the boy with my dry compositions? They would be as dry as dust to him, and if it was your way of intimating that you too are weary of them——”

“Oh, no; indeed, no;” cried Olivia, startled. He looked so troubled and perplexed, and was so genuinely unconscious of the real cause of offence, that she smiled brightly into his face, a great relief in her heart.

He, however, continued gloomy. “I can’t think of any other reason. You know how precious your companionship is to me, and how I grudge sharing it with any one, and yet you gave that boy the whole of your attention!”

“No, no,” she murmured, gently.

“You fidgetted over your flower-baskets with him, and I could never be sure you were listening to me at all.”

“I was, indeed I was; but it was such a perfect day for drying my lavender, and there was such a quantity of it, that I should never have got through but for Algy. And really it only employed our fingers, not our minds.”

But she did not again bring lavender out to dry, and was so obliging and sweet-tempered and submissive for the next few days, that she seemed to Algy as though she had really no will of her own.

“I say, he does fag you, doesn’t he?”

For some time previously the boy had been secretly raging at this, and the black looks of Ambrose on the lavender day had not been lost upon him. Could he, would it be possible for him to stir up Olivia to rebel?

“Fag me?” said she, stopping short.

“Of course, it’s all right if you like it; but if you don’t——?” He looked wistfully.

“My dear Algy!” Olivia began by laughing, but ended by drawing herself up. “It is an honour to do anything for Mr. Ambrose,” she said, proudly.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TELEGRAM ON THE HALL-TABLE.

“WHEN I am alone I often think over what we have been talking about,” said Olivia one day to her inevitable companion, “and though I cannot always agree with you—in your views about women for instance——” she paused.

“Ah, you will come round to them in the long run,” predicted he, confidently.

“I don’t think I shall;” a little touch of opposition made itself felt. “I am inclined to think I shall not.”

“You will; I know you will. Shall I tell you why? It is because you are above the petty foibles of your sex. Were I to be as frank with the ordinary woman as I am with you, she would—let me see what she would do. First take the huff, then sulk, and finally cut my acquaintance. Not one in a thousand would have sufficient openness of mind to accept my classification, and that one would hardly have the magnanimity to endorse it.”

“But I don’t endorse it.” Olivia waved her fan with a bewitchingly rebellious air. “It seems to me that it savours too much of the bashaw; you would paralyse all our activities except such as minister directly to your comfort, or——” she hesitated. “Or?” said he, enjoying a conflict in which he felt sure of coming off the victor. “Or?”

“Or vanity.”

“Vanity?” Ambrose started as if he had been stung. “Vanity, did you say? Vanity?”—accentuating the word with each repetition. Such a thing had never been said to him before.

Olivia, however, was not destitute of courage. “That is what it amounts to,” maintained she, steadily. “A man is a very vain animal, Mr. Ambrose. He cannot do without a great deal of flattery. He cannot endure rivals.” She laughed as she spoke, and took off the edge of her attack thereby, but it was sufficient to disconcert him nevertheless.

“Are you generalising, or not?” he demanded, bluntly.

“Of course I am generalising.”

“And this is the result of mature consideration?”

“Yes.”

He pondered a minute. “You may be right, Mrs. Seaford. It is a fact that we need sympathy, appreciation, consolation—but flattery? I wish you had not said flattery.”

“Why?” She looked him full in the face, and waited calmly for his answer. Undeniably at the moment she was mistress of the situation.

“Because it is so seldom that a woman generalises,” Ambrose continued to look annoyed, “that I cannot help thinking, help fearing that you had some particular man in your eye when you thus spoke; and if you have been flattering me?”

“Oh, don’t look so grave upon it, Mr. Ambrose.” She tossed her fan sticks about with a saucy, rallying air. “What if I have? Is it not something to be worth flattering? Flattery is a very valuable commodity; I only keep a small stock, and of a choice kind; I am not likely to waste it on any but a favoured customer.”

“You think I ought even to be grateful?”

“Very grateful and—flattered. Look back upon the past weeks. Can you deny that you have had my whole time and attention and forethought and afterthought? You have already owned that you have never before had such a dose of good things from one of our inferior sex. Well?”

“But if you call it ‘Flattery’ you rob it of all its charm. I had hoped we were one in spirit; that our interests were identical; that this delightful interchange of thought, which has been so much to me, had been equally prized by you. I am disappointed.”

“The question is,” said Olivia, quietly, “whether you have in reality looked upon it as ‘Interchange of thought?’ You have instructed and enlightened *me*, but what have I done for *you*?”

“Given me what I need more than anything else in the world, sympathy and encouragement,” rejoined he, with animation. “Supported by these tranquil days, I enter nightly on my arduous labours with all my powers at their best. I seldom need to rewrite a page, my brain has been so clear and my senses so keen when at work.”

“I have acted as a soporific then?”

“No, as a stimulant. Your very presence—Mrs. Seaford, may I say what your presence conveys to me? It is like a soft strain of music.”

“And you know you hate music;” she laughed, and the laugh jarred. “Pray think of some other metaphor. Liken me to something you really do care for; an interesting fossil, for instance, or the delicious neck-bone of an antediluvian lizard. How exhilarating would be the proximity of a chalk-pit full of remains! Do say I give you a faint reflection of the joy you would derive from a whole and complete skeleton embedded in a chalk-pit.”

"You do," said he unexpectedly, and her mocking eye fell beneath his. "A truer word was never spoken in jest. I was a fool to talk of music, for which, as you rightly remind me, I care but little—but a discovery, a revelation, some grand conception of nature—those are the things that stir my blood. And *you* are a discovery, a revelation—and a most perfect and finished conception of nature," he added, his voice suddenly softening till it dropped almost to a whisper.

"You are very kind," said Olivia, a little tremulously. "I think I will go in now," and she rose and left him. All the spirit of antagonism wherewith she had sat down vanished, all her resolution to shake off the yoke he had laid upon her gave way.

She had intended to throw Ambrose back a pace; to let him see that she was not hoodwinked into supposing that he treated her or felt for her as an intellectual equal, while at the same time she was willing to continue his friend and comrade—in short to settle definitely the position he was to take up, which had been fluctuating of late.

But now, as she slowly walked towards the house, she avoided Algy, who crouched in an arbour half-way, and took a path which led away from the gardeners busy with their pruning-hooks. Did they notice anything, she wondered?

Did they comment among themselves and look knowingly at the two figures so often heard and seen for hours together beneath the big elm-tree?

"A most perfect and finished conception of nature." Ambrose, to do him justice, had never addressed Olivia in such a strain before, and even now the words seemed rather the involuntary admission of his heart than to be consciously uttered.

Nevertheless she believed she ought to be angry

with him; a man ought not to speak so to another man's wife. He may tell her how congenial is her society and how superior her understanding, but it was neither Olivia's understanding nor her companionship which elicited that deep-breathed, almost inaudible murmur.

Was it then a transgression such as his touch upon her arm had been? She hoped it was; she was sure it was; she was sure she took it so.

Had she not risen at once and left him, offering no excuse lest he should fail to see the intended rebuke? What more could she have done? To have flared up and made a scene would have been impossible, simply impossible.

His consternation and bewilderment—for of course he meant no harm—would have been too awful to contemplate; and her quiet action permitted no ground for complaint, was surely enough in itself? She felt that she had been delicate, adroit—and yet she felt dissatisfied.

It would not do to have a repetition of these awkward breaches of etiquette which had only actually taken place twice, but which had been vaguely in the air—yes, she now knew that they had been in the air—of late. She must be more careful, more distant—but she had warned herself to be more distant several times before. Did that mean that she was weak? How detestable to be weak!

Anon a sense of pity stole over her. The poor man was so lonely, and so obviously just awakened to his loneliness; insensibly a warmer feeling than he was aware of had gained upon him in regard to herself. He had no intention of behaving ill; he would have been shocked at the bare approach of indiscretion.

But it was annoying, distressing; she would give

the gentleman time to cool down ere she saw him again; and she stepped within doors, and there lay a telegram from Willie on the hall-table!

Olivia stood still and looked at the telegram.

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“I’ll be hanged if that over there hasn’t been going on ever since we were away!”

Colonel Thatcher burst into his wife’s presence, and, after a hasty glance round to make sure that no one else was present, threw himself into an armchair and continued: “It has, confound it; what d’ye say to that?”

“What do you mean, my dear?” Lady Fanny knew perfectly what he meant, but she had to gain time.

“Why, that flirtation between Olivia and Philip Ambrose, to be sure. I didn’t like the look of things when we left; I thought it was a bad job his planting himself down at their gates—especially when Seaford was to be absent,—but you were so cocksure there was nothing in it, and somehow I was taken in myself by the plausible face put on the affair. However, there it is, and there is no bilking the fact. He is up at The Willow House every day and all day long, and we know what that means with Madam Olivia, who won’t see a soul unless she chooses, and shuts the door in all our faces with the coolness of a sphinx.”

“Olivia has always maintained that she would be more neighbourly if——”

“If she could bring a man to heel and keep him there. She has done that now with a vengeance.”

Lady Fanny looked annoyed, but would not speak, and he proceeded with gusto.

“And Philip Ambrose, of all people! Ambrose, who was by way of being so immersed in his books that he never looked at a petticoat; he to be dangling after a married woman!”

“Impossible. You are certainly mistaken. Recollect that you have been mistaken before; and, John, you promised me not to be so hasty again in passing judgment on Olivia. You cannot deny that you felt yourself in the wrong.”

“Did I? Not a bit of me. I was thrown off the scent, that was all. You don’t know that young lady yet, Fanny; take my word for it you don’t. She gammons Kitty of course, but one would have thought you, at your age, would have had more sense. It’s all that high-flown jargon about her flowers and her fal-de-rals that imposes upon you, and you will never believe——”

“I will never believe that Olivia could forget her wifely duty,” said Lady Fanny, firmly. “She is heedless of appearances, and might be led to step beyond the bounds of decorum, but her conduct hitherto has been irreproachable, and it is unjust to leap to conclusions because of a little imprudence, supposing there has been imprudence.”

“You may take your oath on it there has been imprudence,” growled he. “And it won’t stop at that.”

“You forget the characters of the two you speak of. Neither Mr. Ambrose nor Olivia Seaford are people to, to—they mutually find each other attractive, that is all.”

“You don’t know India, my lady. You haven’t seen the devil at work there. I tell you I have watched this soul-and-affinity business work up over and over again. I have watched it from start to finish, and the finish is a damned ugly affair. What is Seaford about, that he leaves a wife like his to her own devices? Why doesn’t he come home and look after her?”

“My dear John, how should I know? He does not consult me.” Lady Fanny naturally resented being made accountable for Willie Seaford’s misdeeds. “They can manage their own affairs without our intervention,

I suppose," she added with unusual asperity, telling herself that it was too bad, quite too bad, that she should be taken to task on account of people who were no more her friends than her husband's, and that the person who had really started all this unpleasantness was Kitty, who had got out of hand altogether over Olivia and Ambrose.

Kitty had exulted in the cottage scheme; finding it the most perfect, the most ideal arrangement; applauding it loudly before Ambrose, and defending it with equal vigour behind his back. Perhaps if she had not been herself on the eve of departure for a round of visits, she might not have been so exuberant—but Lady Fanny had insisted on the visits, and to be sure they were tempting, and the only prospective drawback before Mr. Ambrose came on the scene had been a fear, a delicious fear, lest Olivia should miss her.

It would have been terrible not to be missed—but again, if her beautiful proud Olivia should be suffering with sealed lips? "I wonder if you mind my going?" Kitty ventured timidly one day—and was not quite satisfied with the answer she received. Olivia was by nature truthful.

With Philip Ambrose, however, snugly installed at Pump Cottage, Kitty could give a final embrace with only a few tears, and was good-humouredly taunted by her father afterwards in that she could part with her divinity so lightly.

"You have provided a substitute, eh?"

"And the silly little fool did nothing but talk about Olivia all that evening," said the colonel now, a murmur of "Kitty" having escaped his lips. "I grant you she had more hand in setting this business going than you had."

"More!" Her ladyship's spirit rose. Away from her husband she was a woman of decision, and could

lay down the law quite briskly in an assemblage of matrons—but he so habitually overshot the mark in his conclusions, and stirred up so much dust whenever he was on the rampage, that calmness and mildness were necessary on her part if he were to be kept within bounds at all. She could, however, be exasperated on occasion, and she was so now. She had an affection for Olivia Seaford which had withstood much trial and disappointment,—for the penetration which had discovered the root of the evil, perceived what might have been and what still lay dormant in a character yet undisciplined, and continually at variance with its best instincts,—wherefore she told herself that she would never cease to hope.

Nevertheless, Lady Fanny declined to be held responsible for Olivia's actions as Olivia now was. "More!" she exclaimed, accordingly. "I had nothing to do with this move, nothing whatever. I disapproved of it as you did. It appeared to me too hastily concluded and ill-judged altogether. But I confess——" she paused.

"Well?" said he. "Eh? Well? What do you confess?"

"That I was not sorry to have Kitty discover that she was not so indispensable to her friend as she imagined. I fancied that Olivia's equanimity over their separation might have this effect."

"Did it? Had our girl the sense to see herself how things were? I had as soon she didn't, you know."

"One doesn't want her mixed up with anything of that kind."

"If you refer to Mr. Ambrose, Kitty saw nothing, for there was nothing to see," maintained Lady Fanny steadily.

"But you said you hoped——"

"Only that, it being obvious Olivia had accepted a new friend as a companion of her leisure hours, our child should abate a little of her *furore* for her," said Lady Fanny, with a wearied air. "My dear, it is of no use our going over and over the same ground. We do not agree, and we shall not agree about it. And I am very busy this morning." She turned away, and though he called after her, he could not stay her steps.

Later in the day, however, he tried again, having added to his stock of information in the meantime.

"I say, Fanny?"

"Well?" said she.

"You shut me up whenever I mention Olivia Seaford's name."

"Oh, dear, is it Olivia again?" She made a gesture of impatience.

"I was only going to tell you——"

"Some more tittle-tattle of the busybodies which you had much better keep to yourself, since you like it, and I don't."

"Tittle-tattle, indeed!" rejoined he, affronted. "Highly-tighty; you are in a temper to-day. And I only thought it would please you to hear that Willie Seaford returns to-night."

"Why should it please me?" said Lady Fanny, coldly. "What are Mr. Seaford's movements to me? I told you before that I considered him competent to manage his own affairs, and that, if not, at any rate he did not ask my advice concerning them."

"Come now, you know what I mean." He grew more and more gentle; her handling of the old soldier was masterly. "You know what I mean, and you are glad as I am that there should be an end of this folly. It mayn't have got any great length as yet—you say it

hasn't, and perhaps you are right—but anyhow, Willie's return will put a stopper on it. I can tell you I was very well pleased to see the Seafords' dog-cart at the station; so I just strolled up to it, and put a question casually, and the man said he was there to meet his master. I nearly waited to shake hands, but thought it might look as if I wanted a lift back. So I hurried home to tell you, thinking it would be good news for you," he wound up in an aggrieved tone.

But he was not yet ripe for Lady Fanny's *coup*, and she listened ungraciously. "The whole purport of this is that Olivia Seaford's only safeguard is her husband's presence, and you expect me to concur in that. Then all that I have said on the subject hitherto has been thrown away. Time will show whose is the correct estimate of this poor girl, yours or mine—and, till it does, let us hold our peace."

"Tut, we can't help talking about her, if you mean that. She's a personage, confound her; Olivia Seaford is a personage. There isn't a house in the neighbourhood where her sayings and doings are not discussed. By dint of sheer contempt for us all she has made a position for herself she would never have got into otherwise—that's to say, of course, she's good-looking and clever, and has a kind of distinction—give her her due, she has certainly an air of distinction, you'd take her for a Somebody anywhere—still it's the contempt that's done it. It's her utter indifference to public opinion that gives zest to every scrap of news about her goings on. People will simply run to tell each other about this of Ambrose."

"You are right, they will," said Lady Fanny quietly.

"It's her own look-out, you know. If a woman gives a handle to gossip, she has only herself to thank if

everybody she has ever shirked being civil to has a turn at that handle."

"I repeat you are right, John."

"Right? Well, I'm glad you own it; but go on. What else?" For she had obviously more to say and he was dying to hear it.

"Unless you and I, together, stem the tide of ill-natured chatter, there will be a construction put upon Olivia Seaford's intimacy with Mr. Ambrose which is not to be thought of. You yourself in your cooler moments would shrink from it; and what you have now to do is to speak out boldly, at once, on this thoughtless girl's behalf."

"Gad! You wish me to perjure myself?"

"Oh, no;" said Lady Fanny, smiling.

"I'm to say I *don't* believe there's anything wrong when I *do*? That is—upon my soul, I don't know what I do believe," he muttered confusedly, twirling his moustache; then suddenly looked up with a happy thought. "Of course, I could quote *you*. If you wish me to quote you, I'll do it. I'll say 'Lady Fanny sees nothing amiss,' eh?"

"An excellent idea, John."

"Aye, I can say that." He brightened up. "That would be a rare piece of diplomacy. I'll be bound it would do the trick. But mind you, I don't alter my opinion." He frowned and shook his head. "Mind you that, my lady,—and it's rather a rum kind of morality to be hurling your judgment at people's heads when it's the exact contrary of my own. However, that's your affair. You say that I'm to stand up for this protégée of yours—my faith! she would jib at the word, but she is nothing else, if you take her up and make me take her up. So I'll run her as your protégée, he-he-he! If I'm to run her at all, I'll have some fun out of it; if

I'm to stick up for her—" he drew a breath and added stoutly: "Well, I'll do it."

Whereat she smiled again, and nodded at him and applauded him, not surprised as another might have been at this swift change of front, for Lady Fanny had seen many another such before. All along she had been biding her time, and patience had at length her reward.

Let us now return to The Willow House, where we left Olivia staring at her husband's telegram on the hall-table.

But why should she thus stand still and stare? She knew it was coming, was expecting it, had been expecting it for days. The inevitable precursor of Willie's return was due, and she had been forewarned of its appearance. He had stayed away his full time, his exact time, but no more than his time—why then should his precision in adhering to dates be felt a surprise? And yet she was sure that it was only surprise which made her hesitate to open the yellow envelope.

Somehow she had taken it for granted that it would not come that day. There had been nothing about its peaceful hours to betray their end so near, and she had inwardly owned to a certain reluctance towards admitting it could be so.

It was now five o'clock, and the traveller would arrive at seven. Olivia moved slowly towards a chair and sat down.

What made her all at once so weak and nerveless? What was she doing dreaming there? She ought to have been alert, joyful, ringing bells, giving orders—telling every one the good news—Algy, Ambrose—at the conscious thought of Ambrose a sensation she could not define made her veins tingle.

And her head drooped, and her hands locked them-

selves together on her lap. Yet why? And why? And again, why? "Because I am a fool." Suddenly she sprang up, flushed and frowning. "If I did not know myself I should almost suppose I had received a shock. Willie's coming a shock!"—she forced a laugh—"My poor old Willie!" She took up a book and threw it on the table.

"I'm glad, of course I'm glad; I'm always glad when Willie comes home. If it had only been to-morrow—or next day—or——" She paused and continued resolutely. "What I dislike is change. Change of any sort; abrupt transitions; things happening all in a moment without one's being prepared. We have led such a droning life of late—nothing to alter it, nothing to vary it that—that——" Another pause. . . . "The truth is I have not been thinking about Willie; and there have been so many other things to think of that this is a little disquieting—no, not that, but startling, upsetting—and I never could bear to be upset. . . . One gets into a groove, and my groove—oh, it hasn't been an altogether smooth nor easy one, and it has absorbed me. Willie would understand; he would never be so stupid, so mean, so cruel, as to put a false construction—I could explain it to him with the greatest ease." . . . Another pause. "He told me to make a companion of Mr. Ambrose, and he must know that I could not do that, that I never can do anything by halves. It is Willie's doing if I have allowed this man to wind himself into my inner life—but I haven't, I haven't." She struck the table with her soft, ringed hand, and the rings made a sharp sound, for the oak was bare—whereat she examined them attentively.

As she did so, she seemed to see two faces looking at her—the one her husband's, gentle, tender, solicitous—the other that of Philip Ambrose, indifferent, impa-

tient. Yes, she could see his thin-veiled irritation, the glance she knew so well. She had hurt herself once against a garden-roller, and though she had been unable to keep the tears out of her eyes, he had complained of her inattention to what he was saying and muttered something about "A trifle" in a contemptuous undertone. Yet shortly afterwards she had made an apt quotation which called forth his warmest encomiums, and he had looked at her as though she were the one woman in the world.

Once the letter of a great scientific authority was produced, wherein Ambrose was congratulated on the benefit he was obviously deriving from the companionship of his "Talented friend," and there was a hint that the writer had not been favoured with the friend's name. "One does not reveal one's choicest secrets," said Ambrose, folding up the letter.

"Choicest secrets"—she dwelt upon the phrase afterwards.

He will feel, as I do, that this has come upon us rather suddenly," murmured she, now. "It is as well that it should come, perhaps. We were growing somehow to depend upon each other; and when he made me angry, as he often did—oh, it is past, it is past—I am talking of it already in the past," she cried, and caught her breath; "it will never come again—and I would not have it come again—but only if it had not ended like this!" . . .

She broke off and resumed more steadily: "If this had been an ordinary day, I could have gone out and told Mr. Ambrose about Willie quite cheerfully,—but he knows that I am vexed with him, that I left him abruptly without the shadow of an excuse; it would be in wretched taste to be exuberant over Willie's telegram while he is smarting under such a rebuff. For it was a

rebuff; I meant it as a rebuff; and he saw, he must have seen, that I did. Now if I were to go back?"—she hesitated and considered.

Should she return to the elm-tree and say nothing of what had occurred? Should she make her friend happy once more in her forgiveness, and part from him with smiles? Or must the shadow of the bygone moment lie across the future, never to be wiped away?

Again she sank down upon a seat, and dejectedly leaned her head upon her hand, but in another minute was up and stamping on the floor. "This is extravagant, ridiculous; what am I thinking of to make so much of a mere nothing—not even a quarrel, scarcely a coolness? His language was too bold, and I checked it, and was right to check it; he will be more circumspect in future. . . . The future? There is no future. And, Willie dear, there never shall be either a future or a past again"—tears gushed from her eyes—"Willie, dear Willie, never again, never again," whispered Olivia, wiping them from her cheeks. "Oh, Willie, don't. Don't look at me." She covered her face and sobbed; then tore the wet handkerchief in pieces and hid the pieces. But she did not go back to the garden.

When Thomas answered the drawing-room bell a quarter of an hour later, Mrs. Seaford was bending over her desk with her back towards him, but she gave her orders in her own clear, deliberate accents.

"Your master is arriving by the seven o'clock train. Let them know in the stables to send the dog-cart to meet him. Let the cook know also, Thomas; and the cart can fetch anything she wants. We shall dine at the usual hour. And, Thomas?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Thomas, radiant.

"Where is Mr. Rushington?"

"Coming in now, ma'am;" Thomas cast a glance from the window.

"Oh," said Olivia, "that is all then,"—and she snatched up the telegram, and stepped out on to the balcony, leaning over as Algy drew near.

"Would you mind taking a message for me, Algy? It is only to tell Mr. Ambrose that I am not coming out again," as he signified a ready assent. "My husband has wired he is on his way home. I am so busy—there are things to see to——"

"I say, that's jolly." Algy threw up his cap with a joyful shout. "Have you only just heard?"

"Only when I came in." She hoped he had not seen her come in. "And I have to prepare,—to give directions,—to—to—but you will tell Mr. Ambrose, will you?" And she turned to withdraw, having held a rose to her face all the time. A full-blown rose covers a good deal of face.

"I'll tell Ambrose—and jolly well glad to tell him too," *sotto voce* subjoined the lame boy, chuckling as he limped away. "I wouldn't miss his lugubrious looks for something. But *she's* all right. Why does she let herself be bullied and badgered by him, I wonder? He's a beast, and I hate him," kicking a pebble from his path. "He has never a civil word for the rest of us, but just claws her heels, or rather makes her claw his, and—and—but I say, I don't think there'll be much more clawing now," and nodding congratulations to himself, he shuffled along jubilantly.

As he drew near the elm-tree encampment, however, Algy's pace slackened. Ambrose was gazing in another direction, and suddenly recalled from abstruse calculations might justifiably pounce upon an intruder. Within his own bosom, indeed, the intruder could flout the great man, but that was a very different thing from

interrupting him in a studious reverie which he could not but regard with awe—an awe fostered by Olivia, who was always impressive on the subject.

“He has forgotten all about her; he doesn’t really care two hangs about her,” muttered the boy, his steps dragging more and more. “Of course he’s beastly clever and all that, but what on earth she sees in him to bother about—and why should he be told she isn’t coming out again?” he broke off sharply. “He’s thinking about his beastly book, not about her—yet she doesn’t like to tell him, so she sent me. Anyhow, I’ll just chuck it at him and bolt,”—and taking his courage in both hands, he made a dash for the tree.

“I say, sir?”

Ambrose turned his head, his lips still moving.

“Sorry to interrupt you, but Mrs. Seaford told me to say she wasn’t coming out again, and Mr. Seaford will be here directly;” having blurted out which at the top of his voice the speaker wheeled round and was retreating precipitately when “Stop, stop; what’s that?” from behind, obliged him to halt and reply.

“Mr. Seaford’s coming and Mrs. Seaford isn’t coming.”

“Coming *here*?” said Ambrose, gathering himself together and half-rising from his chair. “Did you say *here*?”

“Mr. Seaford’s coming home, and Mrs. Seaford isn’t coming out,” repeated Algy, with a malicious accentuation of the two explanatory words. “That’s my message; I can’t help it if it isn’t plain.”

“Oh, it is explicit enough,” said Ambrose, dryly. “Quite explicit enough; I was thinking of other subjects at the moment, that was all. So you were sent to call me?”—and he rose upright.

“No hurry; he’s not here yet,” said the boy non-

chalantly. "And I wasn't told to call you either, Mr. Ambrose."

"Will you be good enough to say what you were told?" retorted Ambrose, losing temper. "You are bungling your job, it strikes me. To begin with, who sent you?"

"Mrs. Seaford," promptly. But to himself her delegate added, "I am bungling my job, am I? I'll just bungle it a little more then, and you won't like it when it's properly bungled, mister"—and he proceeded garrulously, with the emphasis people usually lay on a message whose accuracy is doubted. "Mrs. Seaford called me to her as I went up to the house just now; she had a telegram in her hand, and she said, 'Go and tell Mr. Ambrose I'm not coming out to him again, as my husband is coming home'. I came straight off, as I guessed I should find you here."

"Do I understand that Mrs. Seaford is welcoming her husband now, at this moment?"

"Rather not. I'm such a rotter at a message," with an innocent air. "It's only that she can't be bothered to come out again, she's so jolly happy and all that."

"Very natural," rejoined Ambrose, suavely; he was now aroused, and the boy's face and tone alike warned him to be careful. "All right, thanks; I understand now. And I think I shall collect my traps and go indoors, too," he added, after a moment's thought. "Could you give me a hand?"

"Oh, yes, certainly. Shall I carry the books down to the cottage for you, Sir?" A little alarmed and a little ashamed, there was an instantaneous change in Algy's manner; he was overawed by the other's self-command; it evinced that in their late passage-of-arms the honours had been with his opponent.

"Give me the big one at any rate," he pleaded.

"There's no need, thanks. My umbrella?" said Ambrose, looking round. He had an umbrella with a cotton cover, used for going to and fro in the heat. "Where on earth have I put it?"

"Why, it's in your hand, ha-ha-ha! Let me put it up for you—oh, Lord, there go the books!" cried Algy, officiously darting forward, as the shaking out of the umbrella caused a general displacement. "You'd much better let me carry some, Mr. Ambrose," and he tried to keep what he had picked up, but was not permitted to do so.

"If you wish to be useful, take a message for me instead," said Ambrose, curtly. "Say I've gone home not to intrude upon the sacred hour of reunion;" and he strode away, but he did not hear a low whistle that floated down the breeze after him. "I don't bungle this job anyhow," murmured the whistler.

It was a full hour before he returned to the house, and then he crept up the back-stairs to his own little bedroom. He had made up his mind what to say to Olivia, but he would not say it unless it were necessary; when he heard the dog-cart arrive and voices, steps and a general commotion below as the result, he felt tolerably secure that it would not be necessary. "She's been a bit silly over that black-haired baboon," quoth he to himself, "but now she'll shunt him unless—no, I don't bungle my job this time, Mr. Ambrose, not if I know it. I shall only remember the first part of your message. As for the sacred hour of reunion, it was beastly cheek to say such a thing—with a beastly sneer on your beastly lips too." He tied his evening tie and resumed. "If she guessed he were in a huff, she'd fawn upon him till he came out of it—so she shan't guess, not if I can help it. The only thing a poor chap

like me is good for is to hold his tongue, and I'd hold my tongue for *her* upon the rack. Hullo, she's laughing!"

He could scarcely believe his ears; he was not anticipating a peculiarly merry evening, despite the shout which had hailed the news of Mr. Seaford's return—for, rose and all, he had seen something of the troubled looks it was meant to hide, nor was it quite a natural voice which had given him the message delivered as we know it was—so that laughing—and yet it certainly was Olivia's laugh, and an immense relief that laugh was. Let us see what caused it.

We all know how infinitesimally small a matter may cause a diversion at an overwhelming serious moment. A creak of the shoe, a smudge on the cheek, a hiccough—something incongruous which would escape notice under other circumstances will prove supremely ludicrous when the tension is strained and solemnity the order of the day—and here is Willie Seaford with a full heart folding his beloved Olivia in his arms, and here is she shamed, pained, yet struggling for worthier emotions, endeavouring to return his embrace, when all at once both yield to an extraordinary, an almost unnatural inclination—with one accord they both break out into a peal of merriment.

"Willie!"

Willie had thrown off his overcoat as he sprang from the dog-cart, and Willie it was, but——

"Ho-ho-ho! Ha-ha-ha! Eh-eh-eh?" cried he, exhibiting himself. "Eh, Olivia, eh?"

"But, Willie?" Her eyes ran over him from head to foot. "My dear Willie! I can scarcely believe it is you."

"Thought you wouldn't. And I never let slip a word of it," cried he, triumphantly. "There's a stone

and a half off me! A stone and a half in a month, and I'm going on with it. I'm not to stop till another stone's gone at least. Perhaps more. Come along, and I'll tell you," leading her within. "I don't want Thomas and all of them gaping;" then as the drawing-room door shut: "Dear," said he, taking her face between his hands, and could any one have failed to note how soft and loving was the voice that murmured the next words, "Dear, it was for you I did it"?

Olivia trembled all over.

With an effort, however, she recovered herself. Since kind fate had intervened thus opportunely on her behalf, effecting for her what she could never have effected for herself—namely, an object on which her own and her husband's thoughts could mutually be concentrated—she would play up bravely to fate. She would keep the ball rolling.

Olivia was no actress, but in youth one can do much that is difficult in after years; for instance, one can turn one's back upon the disagreeable without looking at it over one's shoulder. She now faced her husband, and for the time being saw him only.

Then she walked round and round him. "You are really wonderful, Willie. Willie, I can scarcely believe that it is you." She repeated what she had said before.

"That's what I said. I said you wouldn't know me. See here," and he extended an arm and a leg; "a good inch less round both, and a lot more than that here," patting his belt. "Isn't that grand, eh?"

"But you look so much better in the face. You are improved every way. Your neck——"

"No neck at all. Look," and he worked his neck back and forward in the collar. "Doesn't bulge over a bit now, does it?"

"Not a bit. But how did you do it—how did you

set about it?" Her corroboration and interest were all that could be desired.

"Chucked drink," said he, concisely.

"But you never did drink, Willie."

"Oh, I took my whack like another man. I never was a nipper—that's how I kept fit,—but as Jack Malcolm pointed out——"

"Who is Jack Malcolm?"

"The doctor fellow who worked the whole thing for me. He was our fourth man, as Atkinson fell through, and the very first night we were there—at Stronafalloch—he looked at me and said: 'I say, you've no business to be your weight at your age'. I had told him I was only thirty, you know. The others laughed, but I thought, 'Hang it all, that's a nasty one,'—so when we were alone I had it out with Malcolm, and he said if I were in earnest he'd engage to send me home at the end of the month so that you wouldn't know me."

"And he has, he really has; go on, Willie."

"He said to begin with, that a man stowed away a lot more liquor of one kind and another than he had any idea of, even without touching it between whiles, and that he should make a clean sweep of beer, wine and spirits—the whole bag of tricks—with the exception of one tablespoonful of whisky in my water, and it was to be hot water, once a day. Only once, mind you. It was awful at first. Do you know, Olivia, I spent half my time considering when I'd have that spoonful, whether at dinner or at bedtime? I really did."

"You poor Willie!"

"I hated to see the other fellows produce their flasks on the moor, but I said to myself, 'Damn it, it's for Olivia,' so walked off with my pipe till they'd done."

"You were allowed your pipe?"

“And a cigar the last thing at night. How I did enjoy that cigar!”

“But was that all, Willie?”

“Rather not; there was the food business, but really that wasn’t so bad; Jack Malcolm was awfully clever about it, and though I daren’t for my life touch bread or butter or potatoes—oh, and puddings, he was down on puddings too—he let me eat my fill of fish, and game, and any kind of greenery. He used to encourage me not to mind the others jeering, and say it was all very well for them with their odds and ends of all sorts, to make fun of my appetite, because I wanted another grouse or so.”

“Another grouse! A whole grouse!”

“There, that’s just what they said. If Malcolm hadn’t stood by me I’d have been ashamed to ask for it, but if ever my hand went out towards the bread-sauce, there was his big hand upon it like a shot. I could never evade him; not that I wished to evade him, only sometimes——”

“I know you do like dishes with their proper adjuncts,” said Olivia, sympathetically; “and I am afraid you will find them—what about to-night?” She broke off suddenly.

“Perhaps I’d better take what’s going to-night?” He regarded her wistfully; he was hungry.

“I wouldn’t,” said Olivia, shaking her head.

“But won’t the cook——”

“Never mind the cook. She shall be told to-morrow; and, Willie, I shall be your Jack Malcolm now. I’ll see that you have abundance of proper food.”

“But won’t it bother you?”

“No, indeed; I mean to keep you young and handsome now that you have done so much for yourself already. Come upstairs now—oh, my dear Willie!”

—for he had caught her in his arms and sprung up two steps at a time—“oh, stop, stop,” cried Olivia. It was then that Algy Rushington in his little room midway heard the burst of gay laughter which so puzzled him.

CHAPTER IX.

AN EVENING IN THE BAY WINDOW.

“AND I suppose Ambrose has been a success, eh?” said Willie, as the little party seated themselves at the dinner-table. “When did he leave?”

“Leave?” repeated Olivia. She had braced herself up for this moment and could speak calmly. “Leave, dear? He is not gone yet.”

“Isn’t he? Oh. Glad to hear it. I thought he must have taken himself off, as you did not mention him in your last letters.”

“He seems quite comfortable where he is;” she bent over her soup, and Algy steadily consumed his, and neither of them looked at the master of the house. He, however, sat back in his chair and the plate before him remained empty. Faithful to his new *rôle* he was free for conversation.

“So Pump Cottage has turned out all right? And he has been here most of the time, I daresay? Shall I look him up after dinner, or would he rather be let alone? You know his ways.”

“I believe he—works in the evenings,” said Olivia, a little unsteadily, for though the suggestion was not unexpected, she could not quite meet it as she wished. “We never see anything of him—at least we hardly ever do after dark. He has only been here once—or twice—hasn’t he, Algy?”

“He’s a tremendous gun, Algy, you know, in the

learned line ;” Willie Seaford also addressed the boy, who had mumbled an affirmative, for Olivia had spoken the exact truth—“a swell of swells. You should have seen the looks of the fellows I told that Philip Ambrose was hidden away down at our place preparing his new book. It’ll thunder through the spheres, they say ; and they all wanted to know about him and what sort of a chap he was ? I said you could have told that better than I, Olivia.”

“Here is *your* dinner at last, Willie. You may eat salmon, mayn’t you ?”

“Well, I don’t know, it was just the one fish”—he eyed it hungrily ; “it can’t matter for once though, can it ? Only another time—I say I hope I shan’t be a nuisance with this fad of mine.”

“No, no ; you won’t be a nuisance. Let me know, and I’ll see to it,” cried Olivia, eagerly.

“And, Willie, if you think you ought not”—but he had got a good slice on to his plate and she could not but be indulgent, “Algy will wonder what we mean,” continued she, pursuing the distraction thankfully, and matters were explained to Algy with abundance of circumlocution, and directly the topic flagged another was introduced, and there was so much to say and to comment on and to inquire into that Ambrose was forgotten, and his name did not recur to the conversation during the remainder of the meal.

It was now too late in the year to adjourn to the balcony for coffee, but Olivia was wont on mild September evenings to place herself just within the big bay window of the drawing-room, whilst her husband had his after-dinner cigar outside, and as the weather roughened in the north he had often thought of her thus, her figure outlined against the cheerful glow of rosy lamps within.

How beautiful she was and how dear! If he had married any one else he supposed he should have been a little disappointed at having no children,—children were certainly—certainly a man did like to have a lot of little shavers running about the place—but a wife like Olivia was in herself enough to make a home.

And when his heart was full he would talk, talk, talk by the hour about her. She did not know, possibly she would have been amazed to learn, how the big, simple fellow had woven her very being into his, and enshrined it in the innermost depth of his soul. She did not credit him with much soul, and he gave himself none—but there were men who severally could tell of nights on which, drowsy and weary, they had been forced to listen to a companion who held them in spell while his discourse flowed on and on, upon the one subject, always the one subject,—and, though cursing his loquacity at the time, they had liked honest Willie Seaford the better for it afterwards.

Was the woman worthy of it all, they wondered?

Of course, she was a splendid creature to look at—but monstrously idealised, idealised out of all recognition, some thought, by her husband—she gave herself such infernal airs for one thing.

It must be confessed that the friends poor Willie brought out with him to The Willow House often had to complain of Olivia's airs.

Yet, could they have seen her now! She leaned against her husband as his arms encircled her pliant waist on leaving the dining-room,—(his hand took hold of Algy's on the other side, for even in his holiest hours this man never forgot another's feelings in his own)—and the three moved silently across the hall together. Then Algy slipped his cable and moored himself in a distant corner by a book-table and a lamp,—but Olivia still held fast by her anchorage.

"Don't go outside, Willie; it is cold outside to-night," she shivered slightly as he placed her in her accustomed settee, and made room for him by her side; "stay here with me," she murmured.

Of course he stayed, but she divined his thoughts. "Smoke, dear, if you like. I don't mind. I—I wish you would"—and with her own hand she felt for his cigar case, a thing she had never done before.

"Sure?" said he, gratefully. "I can do without, if you would rather, you know."

"I'll light it for you, Willie." And ere he put it to his lips he kissed her fondly, and her head rested on his shoulder and she closed her eyes, for beneath the lids the eyes were wet. Philip Ambrose was far away from that warm, sheltering presence, and if only—if only she could banish him from her thoughts and memories, if only he would not invade her dreams and lay his iron grasp upon her will!

"You are tired to-night, darling."

"A little tired, yes, Willie."

"Do you think it has altogether suited you to stay here with no change of any sort?"—(No change! alas—alas!). "All through this last hot month? I've been living in such glorious air, I often wished you were with me. And oh, the waterfalls! You should have heard the waterfalls all round on a still night after a rainfall. I used to say to myself, 'If only Olivia could hear those waterfalls!'"

"Were they so grand?"

"Grand! They boomed like the roar of the sea. You could hear them miles away."

"It was a country for waterfalls, then?"

"Aye, a country for waterfalls; rather a wet country, you know."

"Go on, Willie."

"There was another thing you would have liked. A pair of eagles had built their eyrie at the head of our glen, and though the young birds were reared and flown, the old ones clung to the nest——"

"You said 'Eyrie' before."

"That's its name up there; and they used to circle round and round in the sunset, soaring and swooping, just the two together, just as you and I would have done. Once the old fellow was alone, and he seemed quite put out—you could tell there was something wrong with him in a moment. We all wondered what it was, till up she flew from behind the rocks, and away they went together. It was as plain as day he had felt all astray and lost without her. Just like me and you, I thought."

Olivia stirred uneasily.

He bent over her. "Aren't you comfortable, darling?"

"Quite comfortable, thank you, Willie." Her voice choked a little.

"Shall I bring you a cushion?"

"No, dear; you are my cushion." She leaned closer to him, and an involuntary sigh escaped. "So you often think of me when you are away, Willie?"

"Oh, by Jove! It got to be quite a joke with the fellows, the way I sneaked round by the post-office from wherever we were at the end of the shoot, on the chance of getting a letter. Because, you see, there was no second post to our place, though it came all right to Stronafalloch."

"I am afraid you didn't get very many letters, dear;" she bit her lip and stopped. How often she had said to herself: "I *must* write to Willie to-day, but it will do in the afternoon," and in the afternoon: "It will do in the evening," and in the evening: "To-morrow".

He must have trudged those miles over which his comrades made merry, again and again in vain.

"If you had told me, Willie"—and then she was ashamed to think she needed telling; "I am such a wretched correspondent," she faltered.

"Why, of course I knew that; and besides you had nothing to write about," cheerfully rejoined he. "Now if you had been where I was you would have made a splendid thing of it. You would have found something to describe even in the sky. I used to say to myself, 'If she could see that sky!'"

"But one can't write about a sky, Willie."

"*You* could. I used to love your letters when they were all about your garden; there was one I remember—I read it over till I knew the bit by heart—all about a kingfisher you had found down at the brook. I could just see the jolly little creature hopping about."

"But, Willie?" She hesitated with rather a frightened face.

"Yes, dear;" he laid his cheek upon the soft head below, and his low tones were full of the content so wanting in hers.

"Why did you say you 'Used to love my letters when they were about the garden'? Aren't they—I am just as fond of my garden as ever, you know."

"You haven't written about it so much. Oh, they've been capital letters. Always. Jolly full of news, too; kept me up in all the doings here."

"I tried to do that." She had raked the neighbourhood for items, and even condescended to glean them from the servants; she thought he would be charmed with her chattiness, never imagining he would miss the more intimate, more familiar, purer, sweeter note. Now, though she did not wish to say it, she found herself

impelled to suggest, "You liked the old letters best, Willie?"

"Oh, come, I never said that. I liked both. I thought it awfully good of you to know I should be interested in what the folks here were about; only of course, well of course I care more—that's to say nothing, and no one is ever so interesting to me as my darling herself. That's all right, isn't it?" And again he softly touched her head, with his lips this time.

And this time Olivia could not speak, she understood so well.

"I suppose you got about the country a little, took your friends some drives, eh?" resumed Willie presently, in a lighter tone. "I know you went to Ivy Moat once. What did Ambrose think of it?"

Mr. Ambrose had been delighted with Ivy Moat, she assured him; but they had not made many driving excursions, the difficulty being that they would not allow her to sit with her back to the horses—"I should think not indeed!" cried he at this)—and it made poor Algy feel bad—(Olivia lowered her voice, though all the above must have been inaudible to Algy in his distant armchair)—and she hardly liked to put Mr. Ambrose—in fact Mr. Ambrose did not care much for driving when all three were boxed up in the barouche—he said it was neither exercise nor repose, neither work nor play—so it was no use taking out horses, if people preferred staying at home.

"The boy might have liked it," said Willie, looking at him.

"He went in the dog-cart sometimes. He soon gets tired, and a little turn of an hour or so is as much as he can comfortably undertake."

"Is he stopping on? Has anything been said about his going? I'm glad he should stay as long as ever you like, you know."

“His people want him to join them at the seaside. He has only waited till you came to fix a day.”

“My coming needn’t make a difference. However, I daresay you have had enough of visitors, and you mustn’t sacrifice yourself.”

“To Algy; oh, no.” She could not help laughing—rather a bitter laugh. Poor Algy had obtained but little at her hands.

“It must have been a great thing for the poor little chap to be able to hobble about without being overlooked, and have you to talk to and work with—for you found him jobs to do among your flower-beds, I’ll answer for it, and any kind of outdoor occupation would do him good.”

“Yes, of course. He was always busy.” But a vision of Algy with bent back, patiently cutting and tying by himself, nowhere near the elm-tree shade, rose reproachfully before Olivia’s eyes. “I wonder the Rushingtons don’t rent a country house where they can give him what he likes, and what his health requires,” proceeded she, gaining fluency. “It seems a shame, when he is their only son, that they should not study him more. They are well enough off,” and she continued to dilate. Nevertheless despite her efforts the conversation wandered back to Philip Ambrose.

“And when is *he* going?” quoth Willie, placidly. “His time is about up too, unless he prolongs it. He only took the cottage for a month, you know; and by the week, so that he could leave at any time.”

“He has said nothing about it—yet. Perhaps now—— It is getting late, dear, and you have had a long journey.”

“Since five o’clock this morning. I had to be off at five to catch the Loch Lomond boat—the boat lies at Ardlui for the night, and starts soon after six,—and

there's a good seven miles of moorland road to get over, so we always allow an hour, though it's a fine heather road, and our pony makes nothing of it. I daresay he was glad I had that stone weight off me though; I was quite enough for him as it was, with my gun-case and portmanteau." The big fellow laughed contentedly, and rose and stretched himself. "Aye, it's good to be home," he added, looking at his watch, then crossed the room to Algy.

"Bedtime, youngster; and if you had been on the go since five o'clock this morning, you'd be ready for your bed as I am. Oh, you can finish your chapter if you like, you know," as the boy jumped up, shutting his book with a clap, "I didn't mean to hurry you off."

"I'm ready, sir."

"If you want to sit up a bit, just ring for Thomas when you leave the room."

"Indeed I'm quite ready, sir."

"Come along then. *We* won't burn the midnight oil, like our gentleman at Pump Cottage," quoth Willie gaily; "*we'll* sleep the sleep of the just—I say, there's something wrong about that though, Olivia," looking at her over his shoulder; "it seems to hit Master Ambrose a thump on the back. But he can stand it; he'll have the laugh on his side when his book comes out. More by token I'll run down and shake hands with him before I go to town to-morrow; I don't mean to go early."

"Must you go at all?" said Olivia, gently. She would fain have kept him with her for a while.

"I said I'd be at the office for an hour or two, just to get posted up. I can go late and come back early."

"Would it not be soon enough to see Mr. Ambrose when you come back?" She played with a paper-knife on the table; somehow she hated to think of a meeting between the two men.

"I only thought he might like the attention," began he, and then to his surprise Olivia caught him up as she had a way of doing, but had not done all that evening.

"And why should he get the attention? He might have paid *you* the attention of coming up to welcome you and thank you. He has had a great deal from us, and might have been glad of an opportunity to make some acknowledgment. I should not trouble about Mr. Ambrose for my part,"—and she threw down the paper-knife.

"Why then, I won't." Willie yawned and winked aside to the delighted Algy, who had hearkened to the above with an absent-minded air that would have deceived any one into thinking politeness alone obliged him to listen. "I'll let sleeping dogs lie—more especially as I'm an awfully sleepy dog myself to-night, and won't say what hour I'll be up to-morrow. But as for being huffy with Ambrose for not looking in this evening, oh, you little hypocrite"—his arm stole round Olivia's waist again—"you know we didn't want him. We were only too glad he should keep away, weren't we now?"

"Yes." Algy started at the "Yes" and looked attentively at the speaker. There was surely no need to speak so loud, and so emphatically, so haughtily. The word seemed to be flung in some one's face, yet it was not in the face of Olivia's husband, to whom she was all sweetness and tenderness.

"She's mad with herself and with the other chap. She sees he's been making a fool of her; she'll pull herself together and throw him off now," reflected the boy, and then he chuckled again: "Oh, no, I haven't bungled my job this time, Mr. Ambrose."

The next morning dawned bright and clear, with crispness in the air and frosty cobwebs flying from bough to bough.

To Olivia it seemed an outward manifestation of a strengthening atmosphere within her own spirit. She awoke braced, invigorated, willing, only too willing to believe that the past was the past, and that with the dreamy, enervating days now over, their influence would also be left behind.

She heard her husband splashing in his bath with satisfaction. He had been slow to rise, but when he did, it was a giant refreshed who sprang to his feet and summoned her to join him at the open window. "Just come and look for a moment," he turned round, "it's glorious outside! We have the best of it in the south now; nothing beats Old England on a fine September morning." And then he retired, whistling and singing by turns, and every now and then calling to her through the closed door, till she bade him let it stand open an inch or two, and answered all he said gaily.

She was ready to descend before he was, and a note lay by her plate on the breakfast table—lay aside from the letters which had come by post, so that it caught her eye in a moment. And for a moment she covered it with her hand—for a moment she thought she would slip it into her pocket. The writer might not have meant—she paused, then boldly undid the envelope; no matter what the writer meant, she would have no clandestine correspondence.

"Lots of letters, I see," said Willie, entering shortly after. "Oh, I say;" he regarded his own pile with dismay. "What on earth are all of these?"

"Only the ones I did not think worth forwarding," replied Olivia, looking up, and quietly laying aside her own as she did so. "The usual accumulation, but the half are bills and advertisements. Luckily, bills don't worry you, Willie. Now, tell me, is it tea or coffee at breakfast, dear?"—and her hand hovered between the two pots.

"Coffee—but no milk, and no sugar." He was interested at once, and came round to superintend. "It really isn't bad, you know, once you are used to it," and he was about to carry off his cup when she put a note on the saucer.

"From Mr. Ambrose, Willie."

"Good-morning," continued Olivia, nodding pleasantly, as Algy approached on her other side; "a delightful morning, isn't it? And you have letters, too. We have all heaps of letters to-day." (Welcome, agreeable, interesting letters, her voice conveyed.)

"I say!" said Willie, from the other end of the table. "I say, Olivia"—he turned over the note he had just finished reading (it was very short, and took no time to peruse)—"this is a bit—oh, I daresay it's all right, eh?"—after a glance at her face, which distinctly gave no glance back. "Oh, well, we won't bother with letters till we've had our breakfast;" he shovelled them all on one side and turned to uncover dishes on a table behind. Hollo, grouse? My word, it does smell good, and you'll say so when you've tasted it, youngster," putting a plateful before his guest.

"These are some of the birds I brought with me, I suppose; but I kept you going pretty well all the time, didn't I, Olivia? Did you always have them for breakfast?"

"No, dear, but I thought you would like them;" she had a higher opinion of his tact than she had ever had before. He was obviously surprised and chagrined by the contents of the missive at his side, and, guessing that she was the same, directed attention towards the grouse.

"Nice, plump beggars these are, too," proceeded Willie, carving away. "Yours were all good ones, though. I picked out the best for you. The other

fellows didn't mind, because of course the badly shot ones wouldn't travel, and they did just as well for us."

"Had they not any friends or relations to send to?" Olivia was trying to eat, trying to bear her part in the conversation, trying to look cheerful and unconcerned—but it was hard work with that dull sense of shock within, numbing every effort. It tasked her utmost strength to keep a serene brow and unruffled demeanour.

She felt, moreover, that Willie shared the shock. He could not feel as she did, but he felt enough, he had read enough to—ah, she must not think, she must not allow herself even to seem to think; she ran on hurriedly: "I hope you were not grasping on our account, Willie? We did get so many hampers; Algy and I said they were always coming."

"Well, you see, as I paid a double share of the whole concern——" he stopped, he had not meant this to slip out.

"You did? You never told me that." Olivia was genuinely surprised.

"They could not have afforded it, if I hadn't," rejoined he, apologetically; "they are none of them—well, they aren't exactly poor, but they're not rich, and I said to myself 'What is it to you?'—so I just arranged it on the quiet, and they were awfully nice and didn't mind."

"I daresay they didn't." Olivia could not help laughing, and she looked at her husband very kindly, and a shade of the blush which suffused his honest face was transmitted to hers as she continued: "No, I don't suppose they minded, for you would be so afraid of—I wonder you contented yourself with only the double share."

"Oh, it was enough," said he, simply; "they could manage then; and they would like to do it again, but

I said we'd see about it—that is, I was thinking, I do so want you to hear those waterfalls some time or other, Olivia."

"So, naturally, you had a claim to the best of the birds;" she waived the question hovering on his lips.

"I never said I had a claim, only they insisted I should take what I wanted; and, as none of them had wives nor any one to send to, it was all right."

("He thought of that when he paid the double share; he is always thinking of me whatever he does and wherever he goes," said she, to herself. "Oh why, why can't I——?")

But she felt better for the little episode.

Breakfast over, Willie called her aside. "About that chap's note. Isn't it—aren't you a bit taken aback, eh? To go off—to be actually gone before he sent it! I don't think we are exacting people, but, as you said yourself last night, we did our best for him, and as for *you*——"

"I think he is very ungrateful," said Olivia, steadily.

"Come down this walk, and let us talk about it." He took her arm—it throbbed beneath his touch, but she did not wince this time, and they strolled along a tangled path of gaudy bloom together. "Here is his note," continued Willie, producing it. "And a queer sort of note I call it for a man to send who has been spending a month—of course it's not to *me* he owes anything, but he might have had some feeling for *you*——"

"Oh, me, I—I did nothing——"

"What I don't like is the tone of it. It's cool, deuced cool; almost as if we had done him an injury. Of course that's ridiculous—but then why has he written as if—and it isn't as if a chap like that didn't know how to write. If it had been me now, I'm no hand at

the pen, and the right words never seem to come handy, but Ambrose—it's his business, he's at it all day and every day; no one ought to be more up to writing a decent note, putting in a civil phrase or two, making it plain at least that he—eh?"

"That he is sensible of having been kindly treated, and values it. Yes, certainly, Willie."

"Well—he hasn't, you know."

"No, he hasn't."

"The rum thing is that he should write at all. He's not three minutes' walk from the house, and sends up this beastly formal note, and even that not till after he's actually off,—whereas he must have been sitting there all yesterday evening, knowing I'd come back, for I suppose he did know?" he broke off, inquiringly.

"I sent Algy to tell him of the telegram. He was sitting in the garden—over there." She pointed to the spot where still remained the chairs, the two chairs, with the little table—and turned away her eyes after a glance. "And it was only six o'clock. I had come indoors, and did not go out again."

"So you haven't seen him since?"

"No."

"He couldn't have turned rusty at anything? But of course not, there was nothing to turn rusty about, unless," he ruminated, "he thought you might have told him yourself? But, after all, he couldn't be such an ass, and he always seemed an uncommonly easy-going, sensible fellow. I daresay we shall find that he simply was not thinking of us at all. He was full of his own affairs. He says—let us see what he says," and he pulled out the note. "I didn't give it you back before the boy; there was no need for him to see we thought it odd, but——" and he held it towards her, his eyes following.

But she did not look at it, she did not need to look at it; the few bald expressions, even to the "Yours sincerely" at the end had burnt themselves into her brain. She turned her head and gathered her skirts together; the borders of the path were thick and dewy, and care was needed to avoid them.

" 'Dear Mrs. Seaford,' " read Willie aloud, " 'knowing that you are engaged to-night I will not intrude, but send this up in the morning to let you know that I have suddenly decided to join a friend in a trip to America, and as I have to make arrangements, I am off at day-break——' He must have written this last night then," interpolated the reader, glancing up and down, but there was no date. " 'Knowing that you are engaged,' " proceeded he, meditatively, " that's a queer way of saying that I had come home; however, let's finish. 'So I know you will excuse a personal leave-taking.' Humph! it *doesn't* excuse it, all the same. Eh? What do you say?"

"No, it does not." Her face turned from him, but her answer was satisfactory, and he resumed reading:—

" 'With many thanks for all your kindness.' Oh, he does say that."

"He could not say less."

"No, he could not say less; of course not. Still, I didn't notice it before, it all seemed so uncommonly cool and cut short. As if he had hardly troubled to—upon my word, I wonder he troubled to write at all!" The good-tempered fellow was for once moved to asperity, and Olivia approved the asperity.

"And that's all," continued he, turning the page, "there's nothing here, but 'Believe me, sincerely yours, Philip Ambrose'. Well, if that isn't taking French leave—if the idea weren't absurd, one would say Mr. Philip Ambrose had taken to his heels in a huff." As he spoke

he mechanically folded the sheet and handed it to his wife. "Now what do you think?"

"I think as you do, Willie."

"The whole thing strikes you as——"

"Insolently ungrateful." Sharp as steel the words flashed out.

Struck by their extreme bitterness, he stopped dead and stared at her in amazement, but her severity mitigated his. Indeed, he laughed as he echoed "'Insolently ungrateful?' That's good, that's as good as anything *he* could have said. 'Insolently ungrateful,'—ha, ha, ha! I only wish our gentleman could have heard it."

"He would have been welcome to hear it."

"But isn't it a bit strong, Olivia? Come now, isn't it? One shouldn't judge, you know. And you see he says 'Suddenly decided'—it's rather hard on a chap who has suddenly decided on a thing to have two other people sitting upon him for it at their leisure. Because of a little breach of the what-d'ye-call-'ems—of—of—etiquette, I mean."

"There are some breaches of etiquette that nothing can excuse. They spring from want of proper feeling, want of self-control——"

"My dear child, what are you thinking about? Self-control? What possible need of self-control could Ambrose have?"

She had brought it on herself, but after a momentary pause a ready and lucid explanation followed. "His mind was preoccupied when he wrote that note; it was full of—something else; consequently he did not consider what was due to you. To let this be apparent is to be lacking in self-control."

"Spoken like a book," applauded Willie gaily. "You always are too clever for me, and when I think

to catch you tripping, you wriggle out of my poor feeble clutches,——” and he spread a brawny hand and surveyed it humorously.

“Anyhow, we agree about our dear departed from down yonder,” resumed he, jerking his head in the direction of Pump Cottage; “he has given us the slip with precious little ceremony, and what I mind is the incivility towards you.”

“I was about to say it was the incivility towards *you*”—she tried to laugh; “we are each affronted on the other’s behalf.”

“But he owed me nothing.”

“He owed you a proper message. He owed you more than that; he ought to have come up last night if he intended to be off so early to-day, and he ought never to have talked of ‘Intruding’.”

“I saw that, too,” cried Willie eagerly; “it struck me at breakfast, and I meant to point it out afterwards. ‘Intrude?’ A fellow you’ve made free of your house! As if he couldn’t have run up for five minutes—as if we should have grudged him that—and with that long tongue of his he could have said all he had to say in less. Not that we wanted him, darling”—he pressed her arm, thinking of the happy hour in the bay window—“but then he couldn’t know that. His business was to come, and he could have cut his visit as short as he chose.”

“Yes, I think so too.”

“There’s another thing,” said Willie, ruminating; “it might make people talk, his trotting off like this the very moment I came home. If you weren’t *you* and he weren’t *he*, there would be dead sure to be a cackle; and what provokes one is that Ambrose should be so inconsiderate as not to see this. Of course, no one will know he wrote that little dry beastly note, but it will

get out that he made off to-day, and the servants and Algy know that he never came near us last night. Then if I run across Thatcher——”

“Keep out of his way, Willie.”

“I will if I can, but we are sure to meet sooner or later, and he has already been inquisitive, and rather *sniffy* over this affair. I told you so at the time Ambrose took his rooms.”

“I remember.”

“I was glad they should be away while I was. That you should be free from their prying and spying——”

“Oh, Willie, as if——”

“No, no, no; I didn’t mean that; and Lady Fanny is a good sort and rather believes in you—but the old colonel has nothing to do but go from house to house picking up the talk of the country-side. He nearly always buttonholes me with some new piece of gossip. Now you see we thought we’d made that square by plumping down the boy Rushington as your aide-de-camp—you told him he was to be your aide-de-camp, and the poor chap beamed over it—so if Ambrose hadn’t behaved like a fool, if he had had the sense either to go before or after I came home, instead of rushing off as if shot by an electric machine, the whole thing would have passed off right enough. Ambrose should not have got us into a hole; that’s what I feel; I can’t help it if you think me uncharitable, Olivia.”

“Indeed, I don’t think so, Willie.”

“That’s right;” again he pressed her arm. “I was half afraid you would stick up for him, though I saw you were nonplussed as I was by that staggerer of a note. Can you—since you don’t defend him—can you, on thinking it over, get at the bottom of it anyhow? You are so clever at ferreting out people’s motives—at least, you would be if you tried.”

“You think I should be clever at anything I tried, Willie;” she smiled faintly.

“I know it. I know you could—only you don’t generally think it worth while. But now, think; just think. Take your time and cast back in your mind; is there anything you could have said or done, unintentionally, that a fellow with a good opinion of himself could have taken umbrage at? Ambrose is accustomed to being made a lot of; and yet I’m sure we—but then one never knows. Just think a bit; I’m not in a hurry to-day, and I’d like to have it cleared up and off my mind.”

He paused and subjoined: “Besides, I don’t want you to be worrying yourself when I’m gone. I can never bear to think of you being worried when you’re alone, dear.” Again the soft tender note, it smote her and soothed her and shamed her, and her slender figure drooped beneath it.

Now, Olivia, now! Oh, now was her time. Thus entreated, thus wooed to confidence, could she not with one brave effort speak up and out? The truth was so plain to her, so unimaginable to him—and yet it needed but a stammered syllable or two, and he would start, stop short, and—and what next?

After all, it was not much she had to confess. It was but a phase, a passing piece of folly which had left in its wake this ugly, awkward, mortifying moment. She had done her husband no wrong as the world calls wrong. She had shrunk from the touch of Philip Ambrose, and been on her guard against a repetition of that offence, while the incense offered by word of mouth had been likewise rejected; and yet——

Tell Willie that another had monopolised her time, her thoughts, her day-dreams—that he had conquered her by sheer virile force, and she had crouched in spirit beneath his despotism? That his approval or disap-

proval meant a bright or a dark world for her for the time being, nay more, when bright it was a world of sunbeams? Tell her husband that she had watched for the step of another man, and feigned careless indifference at its approach?—(Willie would know, none better, how to interpret that)—that she had been impatient of interruptions, careless of appearances when by the side of Philip Ambrose, fascinated into submission and subjection? Even outwardly there had been much that was undignified, unseemly—while it was but the external manifestation of an inward surrender that had by fits and starts been struggled with, but never wholly overcome.

Tell Willie all this? Wound his trustful, constant, loving nature by such a pitiful revelation? Oh, she could not—she could not.

In some strange way she was conscious of loving her husband better than she had ever done before. He had mounted to a higher plane in her esteem, plumbed a deeper depth in her affections. His immense tenderness for her, his unshaken fidelity, the way in which he wove her as a golden thread into the warp and woof of his daily life, bearing her image in his breast wheresoever he went, seeing it amid the beauties of Nature, hearkening with her ear to the mountain floods and the eagle's cry—all of this touched and moved her inexpressibly.

And yet, oh, hateful! even as she walked by his side, the path they trod was instinct with other associations. It was the one along which she had most frequently hastened to meet Ambrose; it was the shortest way to their usual trysting-place. Here they had strolled in the twilight—at this point she had gathered him a flower. And even now—worst, saddest of all—even now had she caught the click of the lower gate, and a figure

moved behind the intervening bushes, her heart would have leaped to her throat.

"I was thinking," said Willie.

Olivia's handkerchief fell upon the path.

"How would it be to send the Thatchers a brace or two of grouse?" He stooped to pick up the handkerchief, gave it her, and proceeded: "Or say one brace of grouse and one of black game? There's a magnificent cock in the hamper. I fancy old Thatcher would appreciate that cock."

The easy, everyday tone, the neighbourly suggestion—and she was quivering in every limb! She thought now that at a word or a look from him she would have burst forth, and in an agony discerned that the fancied opportunity was gone and was not to be reclaimed. No, she could not speak now, it was beyond her strength to speak now. She uttered an inarticulate murmur.

"But we've plenty," urged he, mistaking its purport. "They made me take the entire day's bag. We really should never miss them, dear."

"I—I—oh, Willie, of course, send what you like. Send as many as you please—of course—Willie."

"You were still thinking of Ambrose? Now I advise you just to forget all that; it's not worth bothering about. See?" He took out his hand and laid it on her other shoulder. "Since we can't make head or tail of it, and since it's no fault of ours, what's the use of fretting? Fretting might do *me* good," philosophically. "Jack Malcolm said I'd grow thin in no time if I had a good rousing worry to keep me awake at night and put me off my food,—but as you are slight enough—I say, darling, strikes me you are slimmer than ever, there's less of you than there was when I went away."

"Oh, no, Willie; I—I—am just what I always am—at this time of year."

"Don't think it." He shook his head. "It didn't show last night in that fluffy tea-gown, but now I look at you——"

"Then don't look at me." She made a playful motion of evading him. "Look away, sir, when I command you; I am quite well——"

"*Are you?*" persisted he. "You were tired yesterday evening, and there's a strained look about your eyes"—gazing into them. Her breath fluttered; was the lost opportunity coming back again?

"And there's something gone from here." He drew his finger down her cheek. "My little wife must not lose her round face."

"Oh, Willie, not 'Round'?" She laughed a trifle hysterically. "How cruel of you, Willie, to call my beautiful oval contour 'Round'."

"Oh, I know it used to be one of your points. That painter fellow who wanted to do your picture, raved to me about Mrs. Seaford's perfect outline—but, seriously, my darling, now listen to me seriously like a good girl, haven't you fallen away a little here and there? I don't say it to badger you, only to see if there's nothing we can do to set you up again?"

Again, again the opportunity! Could she not, would she not lay hold of it? But the weakness he attributed to her was really there; sprung, it is true, or perhaps it would be more correct to say accentuated, by a cause he little dreamed of, yet affording the miserable excuse for delay she longed for—and with shame she availed herself of it. Physically run down, mentally shaken and unhinged, might she not await a calmer state of body and mind, when she would be less prone to exaggerate and magnify, when the past was not so near and could be viewed more justly? Oh, she must—she could not touch the throbbing nerve till the pain——

"I am sure you are not yourself, darling," quoth Willie, very gently.

He was watching her. In the sunlight the fluctuations on her tell-tale countenance were all too visible, and with a start of alarm she hastened to reply in the steadiest accents she could muster:—

"No, Willie, I don't think I am quite myself. You notice everything, Willie. No one else," she smiled a watery smile, "has seen anything amiss. But then no one cares for me as you do."

"No, of course," said he, simply. He did not say, even to himself, that it was an odd remark to make to a husband, especially such a husband as himself; his quiet tones implied a mere recognition of its truth.

"We'll talk over me another time," continued Olivia, thinking the worst now past. "And you shall make me well. And you won't leave me again, Willie—say you won't leave me again, for indeed it is, it would be—I could not bear it. I am so weak and foolish." To her horror the floodgates all at once gave way, the tears were pouring down her face.

"My darling! my poor little darling! Why, Olivia!" Aghast, and yet intensely gratified, overpowered by grief, delight, and love, he had her in his arms, and at the same moment, annoyance extreme, a loud "Hullo!" from behind arrested everything. The two flew apart, and wheeled round simultaneously.

"It's Thatcher," whispered Willie, under his breath. "Thatcher, confound him!"—as the colonel's upright form was seen approaching in the distance. "Quick, darling," catching the handkerchief in his hand and himself wiping her tear-stained cheeks. "Can you—if you'd rather I met him alone, just turn down here," indicating a side path—but she shook her head.

"He'll notice nothing, he's not observant," proceeded

Willie, in an encouraging undertone; "and you really look all right now; if you can pull yourself together for a few minutes."

"Oh, yes; yes, yes," she nodded up to him.

"Bother him, what brings him here at this hour of the morning? Never did such a thing before. Talk of intruding!" muttered the hospitable Willie Seaford, for once churlishly inclined. "'This is 'Intruding' with a vengeance."

"Take care, take care," adjured Olivia faintly.

"I am not glad to see him, that's flat. I daresay he means no harm, but——" But had he read his unwelcome visitor's thoughts at the moment—not Colonel Thatcher's settled thoughts, be it understood, but those that now darted uppermost on the spur of the moment—the frown might have been exchanged for a smile. We shall offer them to our readers.

"Bless me, she is a lovely creature! Fanny always says so, but I couldn't see it; hum—ha. A lovely creature, 'pon my soul! What an air—what a complexion! And with that delicate flush upon it—I must have been blind before!"

During those Indian experiences to which our old soldier was so fond of referring, he had never withheld his admiration from a fair face, however significantly his finger might point at the same subsequently, and, in truth, no man was more susceptible, or we will say in his youth had been more susceptible, to female charms. Hitherto he had voluntarily steeled himself against those now before him, moved thereto by a variety of motives, in which a vexed sense of being outshone and overlooked predominated; but even with this underlying grudge against Olivia Seaford, he had at times been beguiled into paying her tribute, and we know he did so at his own dinner-table till thrust aside by Ambrose.

"The true type of English beauty," he continued now to himself, and saluted respectfully, cap in hand.

And it was with considerably more warmth, if with less than her accustomed grace, that Olivia responded. She was hurried, nervous, fidgeting with her gown, her sash, the ribbon at her throat—she turned to break off a large unwieldy dahlia from the flowery tangle by the path, even in the act of greeting Colonel Thatcher.

Infinitely preferring this to her usual composure, however, the old soldier proceeded with his inward comments, which now took the form of self-gratulation. "Glad I came—glad I caught them—this is as it should be—this will please Fanny to hear about. Gad! if I have got to stand up for Madam, I can do it now with some sort of honesty."

"We were just taking a stroll after breakfast," said Willie, who was still not overpleased at the interruption, and showed it—but it passed unnoticed; the colonel's eyes were not for him.

"May I join you for a few minutes—can only stay as long—Mrs. Seaford?"—but Olivia was slipping past.

In a moment the colonel's bristles were up. Ha! She was off? He wasn't worth staying for? She couldn't bestow upon him even a decent five minutes? She turned as he spoke.

"By the way, Willie, we were speaking of Colonel Thatcher just before he appeared. You were saying you hoped he and Lady Fanny would accept——"

"Some species of our sport in the north," struck in he. "I only got home last night, and brought a good hamper full, and I can tell you they are in fine condition."

"We had some for breakfast," added Olivia, cheerfully; "they were very good, as Willie says; I wonder what Lady Fanny—has she any particular partiality? Willie, are there any woodcock?"

"No, my dear; too early for them. They come in December. But Colonel Thatcher shall come with me to the larder and take his pick."

The poor colonel, they both looked at him so kindly and frankly, his rising temper melted like dew in the sun.

"You are too good, 'pon my word, too good,"—and the grey moustache worked penitently.

"Shall we go now, as I must be off soon?" hinted Willie. Olivia was splendid, but he would not strain her too far; she must be given a loophole for escape.

"You are going in, dear," he turned to her; "would you order the dog-cart round—you'll excuse a busy man, colonel—in a quarter of an hour? That's not hurrying you off, is it?" turning again to him. "A train to catch, you see."

"I ought to apologise for having disturbed you at all at this time," rejoined Colonel Thatcher, who had not yet got out his reasons for doing so—ostensible reasons, we should say, his real one may be guessed—"but the fact is, Seaford, there is a parochial matter which must be settled to-day, and we churchwardens want to get a few opinions first."

"Stop, Olivia—hey, stop—I'll walk. Yes, I'll walk. That's all right."

"A thousand pardons, sir"—Willie turned from shouting the above after his wife's retreating figure, the "Yes" and "That's all right" being in answer to her calls back. "It just occurred to me that if I hadn't stopped the dog-cart coming round, I'd have got into it as sure as Fate."

"And why not?" said the colonel, surprised.

"Why not? Don't you see why not?" He spread himself out as he had done the night before, offering his reduced proportions boldly for inspection. "Do you ask me why not, sir?"

"Gad!" ejaculated the colonel.

"I'll tell you all about it when we've settled the parochial matter," continued Willie; and the parochial matter was disposed of in a trice, when he was free to begin: "It was Jack Malcolm who put me in the way of it, a doctor fellow who was our fourth man," etc.; we need not enter on a repetition of the story, but link on to it the postscript: "As for Olivia, I gave her quite a shock. She wasn't prepared, and I can tell you she regularly jumped when she first saw me without my overcoat."

"I daresay." The colonel eyed him up and down. "If my mind hadn't been running on that other affair—one has only to look at you—it's extraordinary—'pon my soul, it is."

"Aye—aye," chuckled Willie.

"Keep at it, my dear fellow, keep at it. You'll go lower yet. You look pounds better already—pounds better—but what I say is, keep at it! Stiffen your back, and clap the muzzle on. Get a couple of dumb-bells—I work mine every morning. Tramp to the station instead of driving——"

"You heard me. That was why I called after Olivia to counter-order the dog-cart. So now——" he took out his watch.

"Ahem! I think I'll step round to the cottage and see Ambrose," said the colonel.

"Ambrose? You won't find him. He's gone—didn't you know?" ("I just knew I shouldn't get off without this," muttered Willie inwardly, and took no small credit to himself for the artlessness of his rejoinder.)

"Gone?" The colonel came to a full stop. "Gone? Where?"

"Had a chance of a trip to America. Can't say what day he starts."

"To America? Ambrose gone to America? Why I thought—bless me, that must have been a very sudden move?" The speaker shot a suspicious glance.

"Oh, when a man's hat covers his family he can make up his mind in less time than it takes to tell it," laughed Willie. "*You* wouldn't get under weigh in a hurry, colonel—no more should I, though I have only the one to think about; but Ambrose—you remember how quick he was in getting into the cottage? Now he has been equally quick in getting out of it, ha, ha, ha!"

"He might at least have called to tell us."

"So he might. Surprised he didn't."

"He's an unceremonious fellow," began the colonel, conversationally.

"Very," said Willie, and his indifference was grand. "I'm just thinking about those birds," he pondered aloud; "I could send them up——"

"No, no; I'll take them."

"But are you going straight back?"

"I am now, since it is no use going on to the cottage."

"Not a bit of use—but why should you be bothered with carrying heavy game?"

"Heavy?" The colonel had the bunch upon the end of his stick in an instant—and if any one had told him that Willie Seaford's object was achieved thereby—that his visitor had been cunningly despatched home with a load, in order to prevent his making an inconvenient discovery at Pump Cottage, he would have scouted the idea.

But Willie ran up and kissed his wife and detailed his prowess before he left for town.

CHAPTER X.

“AMERICA IS A LONG WAY OFF.”

AFTER all Ambrose never went to America. Perhaps he never meant to go. He had acted to admiration the part of a foolish person in a pet—shot his bolt, created a sensation, appeared suddenly by flashlight—and plumed himself on the grand effect. *Et après? Après* was his own affair.

It was petty-minded,—but Philip Ambrose was a petty-minded man. Sprung from a lowly origin, and for long unaccustomed to notice, his head had been turned by the sudden elevation to which he had attained,—and though he had the wit to hide this, and affect a desire for retirement and obscurity, in reality these only served his turn while he knew himself to be sought after by the world. Neglect would have been intolerable. For he had no inherent dignity, none of the humility of true genius; on the contrary, he set an over-weening value on his intellect, and, as we have seen, was resolute that it should obtain its fullest recognition from others—though when this was accorded he could be pleasant enough. It was not till he met with a check, which his vanity could construe into an affront, that the real nature of the man was seen.

And in the present instance it was not merely his *amour propre* but a deeper feeling which writhed beneath the idea that he, Ambrose of Baliol, one of the men of

the day, was no longer what he had been, no longer anybody, indeed, with Olivia Seaford. As much as he could care for any woman he cared for her, and was blinded to the impropriety of doing so by the limitations of his temperament.

She was beautiful, she was alluring, she abounded in feminine charms and graces—and yet he remained platonically satisfied with his position as regarded her. All he asked for, was to be her friend—her very dear friend—her one and only friend—still, a friend and no more.

She must, to be sure, be able to see in her friend the ideal she so obviously could not see in her husband, and yield him that absorbing devotion which would have been exquisitely ridiculous in the case of poor Willie Seaford.

That she must do, but with that he would be content;—and who could find anything to cavil at in so reasonable a state of things?

He told himself that he coveted Olivia's soul, not her person—and it did not occur to him that he had as little right to the one as to the other. If the earthworm (by which sobriquet he mentally referred to Olivia's husband) could not appreciate the treasure he possessed, of what use was it to the earthworm? It was simply thrown away upon him—a jewel sparkling in a dust-bin; another was free to acquire the jewel.

By such sophistries a scholar accustomed to plausible interpretations of inconvenient facts, found no difficulty in silencing any misgivings which arose out of an increasing desire for Olivia's society, and an intensified pleasure in her upturned eyes and parted lips, as he towered metaphorically above her on the heights. She was his pupil, his disciple—above all, he reiterated, his friend. It was quite customary and natural for ill-

mated wives to have friends of the other sex—close, intimate, ardent friends; and, as long as these were not lovers in the accepted sense, what possible objection could be taken to such a solace of their otherwise dreary lives?

Moreover, Mrs. Seaford was a prude. There was no danger for her, none. Her alarm at the unexpected descent of her lawful lord upon the scene, was weak and womanish, but he would not blame her for that—no, it was the message sent by Algy Rushington which was the real crux. It appeared to have been dictated not so much by fright as by a sudden revulsion of feeling, by which he, Ambrose, had now and then been already aggrieved.

He had never been altogether satisfied about a certain little affair, telling himself that she had pushed him from her on the path. The restraint of her demeanour throughout the whole of the following afternoon had rankled. He did not like to feel that his touch was pollution, and yet "Pollution" was the only word he could think of, and language was his forte. He found himself saying "Pollution" over and over again.

He had felt during that warm August day not exactly amorous, but more nearly so than he had ever been before. Olivia beneath a faint blue sky, with breezes like zephyrs playing about the tree-tops, had donned an airy fabric whose gossamer folds enhanced the grace of every undulating movement,—and though Ambrose would have scoffed at the idea of being moved by a muslin gown or even observing its effect upon the wearer, he had *felt* rather than seen her so fair, so sweet, so spirituelle as she glided towards him, that to slip his hand within her rounded arm was—well, perhaps it was hardly the thing to do, but it needed not to have been repulsed as it was. Decidedly there was a prudish spirit within.

That being so, she was safe enough, if safety were in her mind. He understood; and had never attempted a second transgression of the kind—but it had taken him some little time to regain his former footing, and the struggle to do so was a new turn of the game. He realised that his hold over Olivia Seafood was not absolute; he felt at times an almost overmastering curiosity to know what he might dare, and what not? He confined himself to words, but he would have preferred—once her hand lay very near, a beautiful, slender hand with tapering fingers—and he looked at it. She put on her garden gloves, obnoxious coverings—Ambrose fancied he discerned why.

And we know that Olivia on her part had her womanly instincts at work; and that there actually was, as has been said, a vague consciousness of something in the air which at once harassed and exhilarated her, and caused her to lose her sleep at night and her serenity by day—so that the sudden drop of the curtain came none too soon for two people who were toying with edged tools, and already smarting beneath their pricks.

Wrathful and wretched Ambrose now paced his solitary room. He was not repentant—good Heavens, what had he to repent of? He had bestowed on this woman the pure crystal of his virginal affections, done her the honour of discriminating between her and the herd of shallow creatures who were for ever running after him and thrusting themselves upon him—ye gods, he could not take a quiet walk at Oxford, but he must meet smiling faces under broad-brimmed hats, and see the footsteps slacken as he hurried past—and now that he had found one worth his notice and allowed her to bask in its sunlight, why should he think shame? It was good for her and good for him.

He had learnt something from Olivia Seaford, and taught her yet more. But he had preserved the proprieties, kept himself within the bounds of strict decorum, and no man could do more. He might suffer—"I *am* suffering," he cried, fiercely. "I am suffering the ignominy of being cast aside like an old shoe. She has had enough of me—all she wants of me. I have filled the gap caused by the absence of her lout of a husband, and have allowed myself to be tricked, cajoled, befooled. I took it that she saw the colossal difference between that lout and me. She does not. . . ." He took another turn and resumed:—

"She flies to the one as readily as to the other—more readily, it seems, when it comes to choosing between us. I was only a fad, a whim, something where-with to pass the time, when it hung heavy on her hands. She could divert herself with the poor scholar—but the poor scholar is not quite the worm you take him for, madam," he lashed himself into fury; "he is not a twopenny-halfpenny plaything to be taken up and put down at your convenience." And stung anew to acrimony by every fresh reflection, he formulated the project which was to be his bomb-shell. "They won't like this"; he closed the note when it was written. "It will answer the purpose, I fancy. And if Mr. Seaford inquires into the meaning of it, so much the worse for Mrs. Seaford. I am not a man to be trifled with." But he sat for some minutes thereafter with his head upon his hands.

"Lawks, sir, be you going off all in a jump like?"

It was worthy Mrs. Jones, the cowman's wife, who stood in the doorway. Having cossetted and catered for her lodger to the fullest extent of her powers, making so little out of him that he himself in lavish vein, inspired by overflowing comfort, remonstrated, the dame

was not a little scared by the sudden demand for her bill, and request for Jones's cart to be round at daybreak.

"Yes—yes, I'm going. Don't trouble me, good woman." Ambrose waved her aside impatiently. "Do as I bid you, and see there's no mistake about the cart."

"Jones will see to it, sir."

"Mind it's punctual."

"It'll be punctual; Jones is always punctual——"

"That will do, then. I'm busy now." Then, as she stood twirling her apron, "I said I was busy," reiterated he, in a higher key, "and you are hindering me. You need not be afraid of losing your money, if it is that you came about."

"Oh, no, sir." The gentle old creature flushed beneath his coarseness. "I never gave it a thought, sir."

"Then for Heaven's sake, go"; he turned her round, and as she hobbled away, snapped the lock of the door.

Then he continued his packing which the writing of the note had momentarily suspended; thrusting books, clothes, and oddments at random into the open portmanteau. How differently, how carefully and fastidiously had he fitted everything in, on coming to this place! *Then* it seemed a very paradise, and now? Now he was no longer a precise bachelor whose possessions must be protected from injury and arranged to a nicety,—but a hot, ill-tempered man running away from a defeat, and sore with everything and every one he could associate with it.

He even demurred to some items in the modest bill—whereas the day before he would have turned out his pockets with a bare glance at the total.

"I never ordered this, Mrs. Jones. Oh, no explanations, I simply didn't order it, and I won't pay for it."

But at this Mrs. Jones's spirit rose. "If you please, sir, I'll send Jones."

"Eh? What?" said Ambrose, astounded.

"Since you won't listen to me, sir, and it was Jones you spoke to about it——" but the cowman was not required.

"Never mind—never mind. I can't be expected to remember every trifle," quoth Ambrose, ungraciously. It was a mark of the garron in him that he never knew how to speak to inferiors. "There, that settles it, I suppose?"—and he doled out the money as though he felt himself being cheated.

"And such a pleasant-spoken gentleman as he was when he came!" sighed the old woman, as she watched the cart rattle up the lane in the grey morning light—she did not venture out of her kitchen, and no one sought her there for a friendly 'Good-bye'—"so pleased with everything he was; and though he bean't like master as never comes nor goes wi'out his 'Shake a paw, Mother,' and his pat on a body's shoulder and his jolly laugh—still, I did think none the worse o' he for that. Says I to Jones, 'We're fair spoilt wi' that dear blessed gentleman at the House. And any friend o' his,' says I, 'shall be welcome to the best you an' me's got to give.' An I'd worked my fingers to the bone for this one—but he goes off, and never notices I ain't at the door!"

Ambrose's thoughts were elsewhere, as may be supposed. He pulled his cap over his brows, and turned up the collar of his coat as he jogged up the familiar lane, and cast a bitter glance upon the small garden-door through which he had so often passed. The whole place was asleep—not a shutter unclosed—he had no need to fear observation,—and yet he breathed more freely when the last gate was passed. He could not endure to think that even an underling, even a dog should see him.

And that Olivia, all unconscious of his proximity,

should be sunk in peaceful slumber within those walls! He had once had a glimpse of her with her hair unbound, and a vision of it overflowing her pillow rose before him now—"I suppose I really did care for her more than I knew," he stifled something not unlike a groan, "but at any rate it is over. It is past and done with. She will not have a pleasant breakfast;" he smiled ironically. "She thinks enough of me as a celebrity, an illustrious personage, to be annoyed at my defalcation, even if Seaford is obtuse enough not to read between the lines, and demand an explanation. Besides, she did, she does *like* me—oh, I think she likes me enough to be shocked and startled. America is a long way off;"—and as he proceeded on his journey he found himself saying again and again, "America is a long way off".

It seemed longer and longer as the train drew near its termination. Ambrose was no traveller, rather disliked motion and novelty, was shy of breaking new ground, and with all his knowledge ignorant on many points. Minor details which would have attracted rather than repelled some people loomed unpleasantly before his inexperience. He did not know what equipment to provide for a voyage and a sojourn in a distant country. He was not a good sailor, and the North Atlantic is a rough ocean. Moreover, Bennett was an old friend and suited him as such—but as a companion at close quarters for a considerable length of time, he might pall.

And next the question presented itself, in what light would Bennett see the proposition, supposing—for he had reached this point—the proposition were laid before him?

He might of course be delighted, but if not? If not, it would be awkward. He was not even sure if his friend were going alone or with others; and it was on the cards that a party had been made up, consisting

of men whom he did not know, whom he might not care for, and who might not care for him as an addition. There was a vulgar phrase which Ambrose had once heard, which recurred now to his memory as disagreeably applicable to himself; he felt that he had “Bitten off more than he could chew,” and mentally added, “Why not spit out the bite?”

Waterloo Station at eight o'clock in the morning is comparatively a quiet place; and just because a little bustle and delay and difficulty with luggage and porters would not have been an unwelcome distraction, the solitary occupant of a first-class compartment was contested for and seized upon ere the train came to an actual stand-still—and Ambrose, still wavering as to his destination, and annoyed with the speed by which he was forced to fix on one, found himself almost immediately in a cab and driving away with a frown upon his brow.

He had given the driver Mr. Bennett's address, but he luckily remembered that it was that of a private hotel, and, the hotel reached, he did not at once inquire for his friend.

Neither did he secure a room; he breakfasted—more for the sake of sitting down in a comfortable room than because he was hungry (for the cowman's wife had not suffered him to depart without ample provision for his wants), and then opened a newspaper and buried himself in its folds, not to read, but to think.

How would it be if he never looked up Bennett at all?

There was no need to do so; and he felt less and less inclined for an interview which might leave him committed to a course of action growing momentarily more distasteful. Bennett might raise a hullabaloo of satisfaction, declare he was the very man he wanted, and hustle him off to secure his berth—horrible! the

berth once secured his doom was sealed. Hastily rising, he was on the verge of escape when the door opened to admit the very person he was fleeing from.

And of course Bennett was jubilant.

"My dear Ambrose, what luck!"

The two shook hands warmly, and Bennett looked round.

"They're not down yet," observed he. "Grey and Robins are here, too, and will be delighted to have this sight of you. Passing through, I suppose? Were you here last night? We came in late, and went straight upstairs."

"I only arrived an hour ago," said Ambrose, easily—he had now made up his mind. "Yes, I'm passing through, and thought I might catch you."

"You've had breakfast? If I had known——"

"I can sit by while you have yours. So Grey and Robins are here? Snug quarters, I can see. And you are off on Saturday? Are they going too?"

"Grey is, not Robins. I say, why shouldn't you come?"

"Ha—ha—ha—!" A laugh was the reply.

"No, but seriously you would enjoy it. And if you could not stay our full time, you could get as far as Montreal, have a peep at Niagara, and break off when and where you like. I suppose you must be back by the middle of October, but we could do a lot before then."

"Very tempting, but——" Ambrose shook his head. He was conscious of a feeling of intense relief at having kept his own counsel.

"We might find another 'Diplodocus,' you know," urged Bennett, jocosely. "Hullo, here they come," as the others entered. "I am just telling Ambrose he should accompany us, Grey."

Perhaps if Grey had been equally demonstrative, even at this hour something might have been done to shake the morning's resolution—Philip Ambrose was undoubtedly the great man of the quartet, and he glanced at the new-comer sharply as the last words were spoken—but although the response they elicited was sufficiently cordial, there was a blank look, and he caught it.

That clinched the matter.

"Nothing would have pleased me more, but I am afraid it isn't feasible. Not to bore you with reasons, it simply isn't feasible;" and the speaker leaned his arms upon the table and softened his positive accents with friendly looks round—but it did not escape him that Grey's brow lightened. "I am due in all sorts of places," he observed, as though to keep this longer to himself might be misconstrued.

"Oh, we know you are a swell and must keep engagements like Royalty," nodded Bennett good-humouredly. "It's no go, then; not even another 'Diplodocus' will tempt you? You can't even see us off, I suppose?"

"I fear not—I wish I could, but I fear not. And indeed I must be off now," said Ambrose rising; and murmuring something about "A lot of things to do," he took his departure with due *empressement*.

And he did not know where to go, nor how to get through the day! He had so settled down at the little cottage in the Surrey lane, his world had been so bounded by the low-lying hills on either side, and life beyond been so indistinct and a matter of such absolute indifference for the past month, that thus suddenly torn from his hold, he could but rock, limpet-like, upon the waves, and was ready, almost ready, to let them bear him whither they would. . . .

"Oh, Mr. Ambrose!"

Ambrose had deposited his luggage at another hotel, and was strolling up Bond Street aimlessly and miserably.

At this hour he was wont to be sallying forth from the cottage door in the one direction his steps always took. He would have his books and papers in his hands, his cotton-covered umbrella under his arm (it would not be unfurled till later, when the noonday sun was strong),—and he would be wearing a cool suit of clothes and thin shoes, and a soft felt wide-awake would sit lightly upon his forehead. He would have a day of semi-work, semi-repose, before him, both wholly congenial. And he would have—Olivia.

Now he was a drifting outcast in stiff regulation garments and a hard hat, and it is certain that his unhappiness was increased by his discomfort. The whole thing seemed of a piece. No single item which had contributed to his bygone bliss but was now missed and unconsciously bewailed.

“Oh, Mr. Ambrose!”

Ambrose wheeled round. He was looking at prints in a window, and the last thing he expected was to be hailed from behind; but he could not be angry with pretty Kitty Thatcher, who, having thus claimed his attention, held out her hand with frank, undisguised pleasure, and, that done, drew a breath and panted. It was not for her, but for her distinguished acquaintance to start conversation or not.

“You here?” said he, for the moment not quite prepared to do so—but he was so sick and tired of his own thoughts, and the rosy little face was so innocent of all offence, that on second thoughts he smiled responsively down on it as he continued—“And what may you be doing in London, Miss Kitty?”

“I am just passing through; that’s my maid,” re-

plied she, indicating a figure behind. "I am on my way to Scarborough. Won't it be heavenly at Scarborough? I do love the sea."

"Oh, you love the sea, do you? Yes, I daresay," said Ambrose, absently. "The sea is nice enough when you're on land, but"—and his thoughts went back to the rough Atlantic and the danger he had recently escaped.

"I know; I don't like it a bit when I'm in a boat; but, Mr. Ambrose——"

("Now she's going to begin," thought he. "It will be her 'Dearest Olivia' in another moment")—and he hastily interposed: "Am I taking you out of your way? I'm an idler this morning, and perhaps you are busy?"

But it appeared she was not busy at all; in fact, she had two hours to kill before her train started; and to herself Miss Kitty added, with sly exultation, "Just think if people see me walking up Bond Street with Professor Ambrose!"—and peeped at him from under her eyelids, feeling much like a mouse who has captured a lion, and thinking of nothing and of nobody less than Olivia Seaford at the moment.

Kitty had been about a good deal since she last saw Olivia. She was not disloyal, and the likelihood was that a return to her former surroundings would bring about an immediate resumption of former feelings, but for the present these were in abeyance. The people she had been staying among knew nothing of Olivia, but all of them knew the name of Philip Ambrose, and when it leaked out that he was a friend of the Thatchers, the importance of Miss Kitty Thatcher was vastly increased thereby.

It would be fine to have something new to relate of her celebrity the next time his name came up in con-

versation—to say, He walked about with me the other day and we talked, etc.—hence her prompt disposal of the idea that she was busy.

“And where are you bound for next?” inquired Ambrose, unconscious of having already put the question, whose answer had, in fact, gone in at one ear and out at the other. “Oh, Scarborough—yes, very nice,” he continued in the same abstracted manner. “Very nice, I daresay. I have never been there.”

“Come, now.” Kitty had no shyness, and she and Ambrose had been very friendly together under her father’s roof. Besides, she had now an instinct that something was wrong with him; he looked dejected and downcast, not in the least formidable—she felt singularly at her ease.

“Have you left Pump Cottage?” she ventured; and receiving a nod of assent: “But you don’t want to go back to Oxford yet?” proceeded she; “I know it isn’t term time yet, and you always said you liked doing things impromptu, I remember that. Do come to Scarborough impromptu, Mr. Ambrose?” laughing into his face. (“What a joke if he does!” said she, to herself.)

“You are the second person who has asked me to go off somewhere impromptu this morning, Miss Kitty.” He evaded an answer, but did not negative the proposition, and she was shrewd enough to perceive this and press her advantage.

“It is a splendid place, everyone says so, for overworked people and all that. And nobody need know you were there—at first. Of course they would find you out”—she smiled with open admiration—“but *that* would happen anywhere after a time.”

“Oh, one is always liable to that,” allowed he, and to himself he added: “I might do worse. She is a dear

little thing, and it would get round to the Seafords that I was enjoying myself with her, which I should not be sorry for. Sooner or later they must learn that America fell through, and"—and half-laughing, half-serious, he discussed the pros and cons as they presented themselves.

Three o'clock found him at King's Cross Station taking his ticket for Scarborough.

"I thought our friend Ambrose was by way of going on a trip to America," observed Colonel Thatcher, meeting Willie Seaford the following week; "didn't he give you to understand as much?"

"He said so, or rather wrote it. We heard of him after he had gone," replied the latter. "It was a sudden idea, he said."

"As suddenly abandoned, then. What a comical fellow he is—hops about like a flea. It appears he is at Scarborough, where Kitty is stopping—oh?" as an involuntary exclamation betrayed his companion's surprise, "you hadn't heard of any change of plans, then?" He shot a glance, but Willie was ready for it.

"Ambrose wouldn't think it necessary to tell us of any change of plans, you know. No, we have heard nothing of him since he left."

"And left in a hurry. Well," continued the colonel, as his pause elicited no response, "this is the end of his fine American trip; he has got no further than Scarborough—which is hardly in the way, either! Never was so amazed in my life. Eh?"

"I suppose he found it wouldn't work," observed Willie, calmly. "And Scarborough is a nice healthy place."

"Nice place enough. I've a sister there, and Kitty is with her. But she did surprise us by saying in a

letter to her mother to-day that they had been seeing a lot of Philip Ambrose. 'Philip Ambrose?' said I, when my wife read it out. Ambrose? Nonsense, you've got hold of the wrong name. Ambrose has gone to America. But she let me see for myself, and it was 'Philip Ambrose,' sure enough. Odd of the child to call him that, too; but, however, it was our runaway and none other she meant."

"Why, runaway?" quoth Willie, in his matter-of-fact accents. "You seem to have taken his departure as a personal—well, I suppose it *was* rather rude to you and Lady Fanny to——"

"Skedaddle in the night. And we had never set eyes on him after our return home, though it was we who introduced him to this part of the world, and through us he came to reside for a month at that cottage of yours! Eh?—What?"

"We must take people as we find them, colonel. Kitty enjoying herself? This is her first flight from the nest on her own account, isn't it? Jolly that for a young girl."

"I'll tell you who she's been meeting too; some more people you know—the Rushingtons. The Rushingtons turned up the day before she wrote. Is their boy still with you, by the way?"

"Poor chap—yes. We haven't the heart to send him off, for though he's always offering to go, Olivia seems to think he only does it because he fancies he must. And he's useful, too, helping her with her visitors. We've got a houseful just now."

"For the partridges, I suppose?" If he had been addressing any other man than Willie Seaford, there would have been a sarcastic intonation in Colonel Thatcher's accents, for the partridges in question were hardly numerous, nor was the ground to be shot over

extensive—but he never found anything to laugh at in his unpretending neighbour, and honestly thought he might be harbouring a gun or two. The shooting, such as it was, was a recent acquisition.

"Partridges? I say, sir, will you come down and have a day with me, either to-morrow or next day? There are about a score upon the premises, all told,"—Willie laughed good-humouredly; "but they are so mortally shy and hard to get at, that they give a little fun; and I have only been out once, and only got two brace, after tramping for three hours, so the rest are still to be had."

"Why, thankee;" the colonel looked surprised and pleased. "Very kind, I'm sure. I shall be delighted, but—hum, ha—are you sure you want me? A stiff old soldier, who can't walk through stubble all day, you know; and your friends——"

"I have none. It's not worth asking men down for. I go by myself," said Willie, simply. "I thought you knew, sir; it's not shooting, it's only pottering with a gun—and I only didn't invite you before, because I thought you'd look down upon it," and the matter was arranged.

"That Seaford is as good a fellow as ever lived," mentally asseverated the colonel, hurrying home post-haste, as pleased as a boy with the prospect before him. "I hope he didn't think I was fishing to be asked? I hope Fanny won't think it sounds as if I had? Nothing was further from my thoughts. It was Ambrose I wanted to find out about when I stopped Seaford; and I just said that about the partridges for something to say, not because I cared twopence about them." And it did not occur to the astute gentleman that some one else had also made the partridges an excuse for getting off the subject of Philip Ambrose.

That some one had very nearly been startled out of the cautiousness wherewith Willie had armed himself. He expected to be spoken to about Ambrose, and had planned what he should say, and even the innocent look he should assume on such occasions, but Colonel Thatcher's news was so unlooked for, not to say momentous, that he forgot all about his speeches and thought about the innocent air too late.

To be sure, he reflected afterwards, he had not done badly, a little surprise was natural, and he had not gone beyond bare surprise, following it up with very well-assumed indifference. There had certainly been no sense of injury visible, and he heard himself saying "Scarborough is a nice, healthy place" with the satisfaction of a man who had made a point. Then he had got on to the partridges.

He did not particularly want to go partridge shooting with Thatcher; Thatcher was a boring old fellow—at least, well, he liked Thatcher well enough, but a whole afternoon in his company would be slow, not to add that he would probably turn up his nose at the sport, the sport would be on such a very small scale,—but he had been forced to circumvent his elderly neighbour somehow, and took the only method that presented itself. When he had seen Olivia he would know what to say and what to do, for of course the new development would require new treatment—but alone and unprepared, his only safety lay in getting off dangerous ground as fast as possible.

"At Scarborough?"—he now repeated to himself,—“at a rotten seaside place full of trippers? The sort of place that a known man who hates publicity would shun like the plague? . . . And he must have gone there straight away—straight from here, after telling us he had ‘Suddenly decided to go to America’! Now

that's a rum thing to have done, uncommonly rum—there must have been some meaning in it. A fellow doesn't give out he is going to one place and take a bee-line for another without having some sort of reason for such a wheel-about-face. If he had skulked off without paying up, or if bills had been coming in—but mother Jones makes no complaint, and says there is nothing to forward, though she has his Oxford address in case there were. Well *I* can't make head or tail of it anyhow," summed up straight-forward Willie, shaking his sagacious head: "Olivia! Olivia!" as he spied her over the garden gate,—“hi! come this way,”—and he hurried in.

Olivia was quietly raking, but she turned at the sound of her name, and advanced rake in hand, with a promptitude that was something new.

Olivia was not happy, but she had obtained a certain dull quiescence with things as they were, and though everything she did reminded her of Ambrose, and her pleasant tasks seemed to have lost their flavour now that she might pursue them unmolested, she got through her days somehow, and there was always Willie's return to look forward to as the afternoon waned.

He brought her books, newspapers, occasionally little presents of novelties which caught his eye—but it was himself and not his gifts she longed for. His cheerful presence threw a kind of protecting warmth around her, his interest extended to her minutest doings, while there were times when he only stood and smoked upon the path while she passed up and down and in and out of her borders, and all she wanted was to feel that he was there.

But she was rather pleased than otherwise to perceive that now he had something to tell, some news to give of the outer world which was beginning to regain

a measure of interest for her. She had read leading articles again during the past few days—not without a sigh, for Ambrose had been wont to extract their essence for her benefit, adding thereto his own views in brilliant, forceful language—and she could not keep herself now from wondering if he would have agreed to an interpretation or sanctioned a step advocated by *The Times*? Still, she had read, she had been thankful for the distraction, and resolved upon the effort. So if Willie's excitement meant that the German Emperor——?

“I say, Olivia, what *do* you think? Ambrose——”

The German Emperor and the affairs of nations went down before the last word; a spasm shot through her veins. “Come along, and I'll tell you,” quoth Willie, turning her round. “There's no need for everybody to know. It's the queerest thing you ever heard about Ambrose.”

“Has he”——she struggled to speak calmly, “has he written to you?”

Could he have written? Could he have dared to write? And, if so, what? Of what was he capable? Of how much might his presumption——

“You know he said in his note that he had ‘Suddenly decided to go to America,’ ” proceeded Willie, all unconscious, and bursting with information. “He did say that, didn't he? Those were his very words, weren't they?”

“Certainly they were, I have the note.”

“You have? I'm glad of that. At least, it's no matter, for we can both testify that he wrote——”

“Never mind what he wrote, Willie, what is it now?” She breathed a shade more freely. Ambrose could not have done what for one awful moment she had half feared, written a wild, mad confession, or appeal, or——

"You're not listening," said Willie, shaking her. "I'm going to give you a fine shock. You often say my shocks don't come off, but this is a fizzer. Come, guess; I'll give you three guesses—though three is hardly fair, because I've already given you a sort of lead over——"

"I'm not in the mood for guessing, Willie, dear. Have you not tantalized me enough?" said Olivia, quietly. "You have heard from Mr. Ambrose?"

"Not I. Not he. Devil a word has he written to me—or to any one for that matter. It was Thatcher who told me. I met him on the road just now—oh, you needn't think he got anything out of me," he caught himself up to interpolate, mistaking the expression on her face, "you needn't be afraid; I was as cool as a cucumber—after the first. At the first I must own I did feel rather taken aback, for it was beastly mean the way he sprang it upon me, knowing well enough——"

"It? What?" She tried to be patient, but there was a tremulous sensation beginning to make itself felt. If only he would be quick before it grew stronger! "What, Willie, what?" she urged.

"Why, this about Ambrose. This I'm going to tell you about. And, by the way the old colonel hurled it at me, I'm sure he suspects there's a screw loose somewhere. He scents there's been a split of sorts between us. He was never so desperately interested and so sure I should be interested in what Ambrose is about, for nothing."

"But what *is* he about? And why should we not be interested?" said she. "It was rude and ungrateful of Mr. Ambrose to part from us as he did, but we need not harbour ill-feeling towards him on that account. He is done with—if he chooses to be done with," and she drew up her head.

“Just what I said to myself. I said you’d know how to take it. But anyhow that ferrety old Thatcher got no change out of me, when he tried to make me join him in letting off fireworks. He was ‘Never so amazed in his life’—and a lot more of the kind. Great rot, I call it. Why shouldn’t a man please himself, especially a bachelor like Ambrose, who has no one else to please? His goings and comings are nothing to us or to any one; and why that old ass Thatcher should be so excited over them—but all I said was that Scarborough was a nice, healthy place——”

“Scarborough?”

“That’s where Ambrose is—not in Yankeeland at all! Went straight from here to Scarborough, if you please—and has stayed there ever since!”

“Scarborough?” echoed Olivia, to whom the awesome revelation came as such an anti-climax and also as such a rebound from the tension within, that she could not forbear laughing outright. “My dear Willie, has all this fuss been about nothing but because Mr. Ambrose has gone to Scarborough?”—and she laughed and laughed.

We have said that Olivia was not a woman easily moved to mirth, but when she was her laugh was delightful, irresistible, and her husband for one never failed to join in it. He did so now heartily; he did not detect a hysterical note in her merriment.

“There, now, that’s what I said,” said he, as soon as he could speak. “All this commotion because—and why the dickens shouldn’t Ambrose go to Scarborough if it pleases him? Rather he than I. That’s what I said, at least I think I did, to Thatcher.”

“I daresay you didn’t, Willie; but—Colonel Thatcher has heard from Mr. Ambrose, then?” In her relief she was quite chatty and disposed for more.

“Not he! Not a bit of it. That’s the point.

Ambrose lies low, but Kitty lets out in a letter to her mother the news that throws all the fat upon the fire."

"Yes, I knew Kitty was going to Scarborough," said Olivia, after a minute's pause. "She wrote and gave me her address there about a week ago. She was going to her aunt, Mrs. Hothfield."

"So Thatcher said. And now she writes that Ambrose—and, by the way, the Rushingtons have turned up there, too—but they don't count. It's the deuced queer behaviour of Ambrose that——"

"But, Willie, you agreed with me just now that it was absurd to take Mr. Ambrose to task for going to Scarborough."

"So it is, but you miss the point, my girl; you're a very clever woman, but you miss the point for once. It's not because he goes to that place or any place, but because he *says* he is going somewhere when he has no need to say anything, and nobody asks any questions—and then goes somewhere else and keeps dark about it!"

"That certainly sounds very deceitful and dramatic, Willie." She was grave enough now, though affecting to jest. "You two gossiping men——"

"But I tell you I didn't gossip; I pooh-poohed the whole thing—to Thatcher. Only to *you* do I say that there was something sneaky, not quite open and above-board in a man giving out that he was on the rush, so much on the rush that he couldn't spare five minutes——"

"He did not say that, you know."

"At any rate, that he could not wait till a decent hour in the morning to go, so that he could have seen me first and said a proper 'Good-bye'—and then, ha, ha, ha! it's too ridiculous, taking his ticket for Scar-

borough! I'll eat my hat if there wasn't something more than appeared in that, Olivia."

Olivia said nothing.

"You might call on Lady Fanny and see what she has to say about it?" proceeded he, tentatively.

This was just what Olivia was thinking; having got over her first feeling, she was beginning to experience a certain curiosity, even a certain sympathy with Colonel Thatcher's excitement. Ambrose having severed his connection with The Willow House might not care to "Intrude" (this his own word) upon herself and her husband to the extent of announcing his change of plans, but why should he seek to puzzle the Thatchers? A few lines would have left nothing to wonder about or cavil at? She decided to call on Lady Fanny.

"I'll go with you, if you like?" said Willie. "We owe them a proper after-dinner call. You know we never made it."

"I went one day, but Lady Fanny was out. I took Mr. Ambrose and Algy there;" said Olivia, and stopped abruptly. How well she remembered the day! Ambrose had been in his best mood, genial and appreciative, even merry, making little jokes with Algy about a certain disputation the two fell into, and amiably diverted when the boy stuck to his point. He had insisted on taking the back seat; and as Lady Fanny Thatcher was not at home, the three had proceeded for a long drive, all in the best of humours with each other.

At that time Algy had not shown any dislike of Mrs. Seaford's favoured companion, and the latter had viewed the crippled lad with an indulgence which disappeared as the two grew to know each other better. Ambrose would be compassionately solicitous for Algy's comfort—to Olivia's delight; and though he once made the mistake of offering to carry him in at the end of a long day—

the day in question—it was done with such obviously good intention that if poor Algy was vexed and affronted, another person thought he had no need to be so.

It all rose before Olivia now, like a picture suddenly illuminating a blank wall, and she felt a little sick as she looked at the picture. How could she, how could she? Was it really herself who sat up there in her high barouche, smiling and prattling, intoxicated by the splendour of the summer day, the air, the motion, the sweet scents from the hedge-rows and—something else, something she was now ashamed to think of. Could she have been that vain, chattering creature, laying herself out for flatteries, keeping up the ball of badinage and repartee with ever-increasing freedom and success? Occasionally there were flashes of real wit in the nonsense and personalities.

But she caught Algy's eye upon her once or twice towards the end of the day. The boy grew grave as she and Ambrose made more and more of each other. Oh, that she could wipe out the scene; wipe it from her own memory—and from theirs!

But she did not refuse her husband's escort to call again upon the Thatchers; reflecting that the call must be made, and that no one but herself, no one at The Grange, at any rate, knew anything of what had happened on the former occasion, and she clung to Willie now.

"Your aunts won't expect to come?" A couple of maiden aunts constituted the "Houseful" of which he had spoken to Colonel Thatcher, and we may add that it was sheer fluster and nothing else which made him grandiloquent. No one ever accused Willie Seaford of swaggering. "We could go in the dog-cart," proceeded Olivia, considering, "and they can have the carriage to go where they please."

"That will do famously. I haven't driven you in the dog-cart for ages." He looked pleased at the idea.

"At four o'clock to-morrow, then. You are at home to-morrow, aren't you?"

"Yes. But I say; four is rather early——"

"We might take a little round first."

"Oh, that's all right," quoth Willie jubilantly,—and before he went indoors he strolled round by the stables and casually mentioned to the coachman, in the hearing of the groom, that he was going to drive their mistress out next day.

CHAPTER XI.

COLONEL THATCHER'S VIEWS ON HERO-WORSHIP.

AND the following morning a little incident occurred which made him glad that he had done so.

He was walking with Olivia in a new plantation which had been formed to border the meadow brook, and they were calling each other's attention to its growth and promises, when their progress was arrested by the head gardener, who approached cap in hand.

Jenkyns, albeit a valuable servant, was a surly fellow with every one but his mistress, for whom he entertained profound veneration, and whose supremacy in his special domain had long been established. What "She" said (he invariably thought of her as "She," and the one "She" in the world for him) was law; her approval was the sole meed of praise he ever coveted—whilst its withdrawal would make him a man to be feared and avoided by his subordinates until all was smooth again.

Alas! during the past months Jenkyns had felt himself superseded, and felt it as only a favoured underling can. He had no redress, no means of airing his wrongs, far less of remedying them; while day by day there took place fewer and fewer of those confabulations and consultations his soul loved, and evening by evening he had to leave off work unsustained by the nightly inspection of what had been accomplished,

which had never been omitted, without some reason for it, in his annals hitherto.

Too loyal to his mistress to point this out to others, in his own mind the poor ill-used and deserted man did not scruple to ascribe the change to the influence of Mr. Ambrose, whom he naturally hated in consequence,—but had it not been for a passage-of-arms between the two on the very day before Ambrose left, this might never have come to the surface.

Jenkyns had defied his supplanter, but he fancied that the supplanter had got the better of him for all that, else why did “She” still continue indifferent and elusive? Brooding over and magnifying every petty alteration in Olivia’s habits and demeanour, he resolved on the bold stroke he was now about to take.

“If you please, sir?” It was perhaps the first time Mr. Seaford’s gardener had ever spontaneously addressed himself to his master, his mistress standing by.

“Hullo, Jenkyns? Anything wrong?” replied Willie, foreseeing a grievance. “Must have your grumble, eh? What is it? Water supply short? Leaf-mould rotten?” He laughed pleasantly, but the gloom on the brow before him did not lighten.

“No, sir. ‘Taint nothin’ o’ *that* sort, sir,” replied Jenkyns, with emphasis. “I didn’t like to trouble you before, sir: thinkin’ there was some mistake and that you would speak to me yourself, but”—the storm burst—“what I wants to know is this, how many people is to give orders in this ‘ere garden? I’m told this an’ I’m told that; and one says one thing and one another; and I’m that put upon”—he was gathering velocity and a check, if one were to be made at all, must be made on the instant.

“Tut-tut; come, come; my good fellow, it seems to me you have little enough to complain of in that line,”—

even the good-natured Willie could not refrain from the retort, so notorious was Jenkyns's independence. "No one in my service is less under authority——"

"Not while you are at home, sir; and I've never complained o' you, sir——"

"Oh, you haven't? Well, on the whole," quoth Willie, the corners of his mouth twitching—"however let's have it out. Here's Mrs. Seaford would be more sorry than anybody that your feelings should be hurt,"—and he looked at Olivia, but though she hurriedly murmured something, it was not the whole-hearted assent that the aggrieved one felt he had a right to. Speak now he would.

"Everythin's gone wrong while you was away, sir. I never knew nothin' like it before. There's that young Mr. Algy, he's broken two teeth o' my best rake——"

"Oh, Jenkyns, you know I promised you a new one,"—but Jenkyns steadily averted his face from his mistress, he was not to be won over.

"Messages? I don't hold wi' messages, not bein' used to sich," proceeded he, dourly; "but I've taken them, no one can say I haven't taken them—though they never come to me i' that way afore; through a stranger, and him has had the use o' my best tools, an' a barrer to sit upon, an' took up in an hour a whole border o' young plants mistaking o' them for weeds"—with profoundest scorn. "But there, Mr. Algy ain't no gardener, but he's a *gentleman*, which there's one as isn't."

"You mean Mr. Ambrose. What is your complaint against Mr. Ambrose?"

"Interfering i' my garden. Givin' orders i' your place. Them's my complaints, sir. Who's he to be layin' his commands on me, a callin' o' me from my work—'Jenkyns—Jenkyns'—a settin' there at his ease;

an' when I comes 'Oh, Jenkyns,' says he, as superior like as if the whole place belonged to him? 'I want you,' says he. 'Come nearer,' he says. 'I'm very busy, sir,' says I. 'Well, it's got to be done, anyhow,' says he; 'I can't endure it another day,' he says. 'Just you go down to the cottage and take your men with you,' says he. 'You see that tree down there?' (it's the chestnut with the pink blooms, sir, as you've always said made a nice bit o' colour, looked at from here)—'down with it,' says he. 'Makes my room too dark,' he says. 'I'm not goin' to cut down no trees at your orders,' says I—and with that he rounds on me and abuses my impudence, an' we has it out; then he goes to missis"—(Olivia had turned away, and the speaker drew nearer, all the accumulated jealousy within swelling to his lips)—"he goes to missis and poisons her agin me."

"No, no; nonsense, Jenkyns, nonsense. You had only to speak to your mistress."

But Jenkyns's hand was upraised.

"My word agin his?"—he laughed unpleasantly. "Nothin' that I nor any one else said agin Mr. Ambrose would ha' been listened to for a moment, sir. It's *that*, sir, I come about. Is he to come atween us? me as has served her faithfully——"

"Ha-ha-ha! Olivia! I say, Olivia!"

In his utter amazement and matchless indignation Jenkyns stepped back right into the box-border behind.

"Olivia! Come back, come here," cried her husband, his accents bubbling with merriment. "We've got to the bottom of this at last. Poor Jenkyns has been mortally affronted by our friend Ambrose. Ambrose, in the clouds as usual, has given dire offence to Jenkyns. Cheer up, man," to him; "your mistress will set it right in two words. Come, dear," to her, "speak up

for our absent friend." (A slight, a very slight, accentuation on the word "Our" was meant for both his auditors.) "You know Ambrose better than I," continued Willie, genially, "and can vouch for it, I'm sure, that he meant no harm. He has an awkward manner, isn't that it? Yes. And as for poisoning your mind against our faithful Jenkyns? Of course. So now we'll go and inspect the tree. I presume it is still standing, eh, Jenkyns? Ha-ha-ha!"

"And that's all I gets for dooin' my dooty!" But it was a cowed and paralysed Jenkyns who stared stupidly after the retreating couple, and hearkened to their intermingling voices dying away in the distance. Never having dared to look at Olivia he had not seen that she was white to the lips, and his discomfiture was complete.

And it was to be yet more complete, if such a phrase is permissible, within the next hour. "Your mistress and I have had a tussle, Jenkyns. She stands by you, and says the tree is to remain. I say, Mrs. Jones's next lodger must not have to complain of a dark room. We can't agree. However, as you are two to one——" and he shrugged his shoulders.

"Two to one?"—the words were music in poor Jenkyns's ears. Already repentant and miserable, he could only mutter something about "Willingness to obey orders from them as had the right to give them," and look the contrition he felt.

"Well, well; it's all right now. But don't take fancies into your head another time," quoth Willie, clearly; "else, you see, it might lead to your and my parting. You'd be sorry to go and I'd be sorry to lose you—and Mrs. Seaford"—Jenkyns's breath came short—a garden without *her*?—"Mrs. Seaford would never forgive me if I turned you away," concluded his

master, nodding at him ; “so don’t oblige me to, you know.”

“And that draws your teeth, my boy,” added Willie to himself, and whistled softly as he turned away. “You’ll think twice before you make insinuations to me again,”—but even Olivia imagined that he looked on Jenkyns’s behaviour as rather a joke than otherwise, and half expected him to make a story of it to the Thatchers presently.

Should she hint that he had better not? But now whenever she wished to speak of Ambrose there was that weak trembling in her limbs and rising in her throat which frightened her, and which Willie might grow to notice if it showed too prominently—nothing that could happen in Lady Fanny’s drawing-room would be worth the risk of that. She decided to let him alone and trust to his forgetfulness.

Besides, Willie had seemed to blunder less of late than he used to do, and she had once told him so. “A fellow had need to be an awful fool if he can’t learn by giving his mind to it what his wife likes and dislikes,” said he. “I’m slow, but give me time—give me time, Olivia, and I’ll get there.” She found herself repeating the phrase afterwards.

On the present occasion she was dressing for her call when her husband tapped at the door.

“Oh, Willie, it’s not four o’clock yet.”

“I know,” said he ; “it’s a quarter to, but I wanted to see what you were putting on?”

“What I am putting on?” echoed Olivia, in surprise. He trusted so implicitly to her taste, and was so uniformly satisfied with the result, that she could not remember ever having had an inquiry beforehand till now. “Why this,” continued she, looking down at herself. “It’s nothing new ; I have had it all the summer.”

“Hum—ha?” He regarded dubiously the light clinging fabric whose delicate folds fell softly—too softly—about her slender frame, (it was the same filmy robe she had worn on a notable occasion when Ambrose had been moved to transgress, but being unaware of any link between the circumstances it was still in frequent use, and was, indeed, rather a favourite). “But I say, it’s not midsummer now, you know,” expostulated Willie; “isn’t that just a little thin? Haven’t you anything warmer?”

“I can put on a wrap in the dog-cart. And there is no wind; one never feels cold on an absolutely still day like this.”

“A wrap, eh? So you can, only——”

“Lady Fanny’s rooms are always full of sun, and she often has a fire besides.”

“Yes, I know,” but he still remained dissatisfied.

“What is it, Willie? There is something you don’t like about me; what is it?” Olivia looked disturbed and a little impatient; it was so seldom that Willie did not like anything and everything about her.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” said he, hastily. “Oh, I daresay you are all right. You know best what’s worn and all that. It only seemed to me——” again he hesitated and stopped.

“If you are going to be all day about it,” said Olivia, but not ill-humouredly, “I shall never find out what’s wrong till it’s too late to alter it.”

“You would alter it? Well then, then I suppose I’d better—it’s only that you do look such a slip of a creature unless you are bulked out a bit,” he tried to laugh, not quite successfully—“there’s so little of you that it falls away to nothing in that butterfly’s-wing concern. I don’t want the Thatchers to think—that’s to say Lady Fanny will be taking me to task for letting

you run down—for you *are* a little run down, dear, that's a fact; and people seeing you for the first time, might—might notice it.”

“Am I as bad as that?” said Olivia, in rather a low voice.

“As bad as what? You're not ‘Bad’ at all, you're only what you often are at the end of the summer, rather washed out.” He hunted about for the word and brought it forth triumphantly. “Oh, it's no matter; it will soon right itself now that the hot weather is gone, and I'm here to look after you.”

“Yes, Willie, I always flourish best when you are here to look after me,”—but she was obviously distressed and thoughtful. “I did not know I had become a fright, Willie.”

“You never looked better, that's to say prettier, in your life. There now, don't take it to heart about the other thing; we can't make a big woman of you whatever we do.”

“I could change to a coat and skirt, Willie.”

“Could you?” He caught at the idea. “And you wouldn't mind? It wouldn't bother you? There's lots of time, you know; only it does seem a shame when you're actually ready—it isn't worth the trouble,”—but he looked wistful.

“It *is* worth the trouble if it pleases you. Now be off,” she ran on, seeing his face flush with pleasure, and shy with herself at having called up the flush,—and she rang the bell for Laurette with one hand and set to work unhooking and untying with the other so vigorously as to check any demonstration of gratitude he might otherwise have made. “Get away, get away, Willie,”—and Willie had to go.

“Laurette—quick—your master thinks this dress too cold for the dog-cart; give me—let me see—a thick

warm coat and skirt. Not that," said Olivia decidedly, as Laurette offered one for inspection; "he will object to that too. Yes—the brown. No, I haven't colour for brown to-day." After a moment's hesitation—"Oh, that old purple thing? Well, I suppose it will do, though I always hated it," and she thrust herself into the despised purple.

"The hat, at least, will become Madame," observed Laurette, tendering consolation in the shape of a large felt hat with shaded plumes curling over the brim, "and there is no wind. Madame can wear the hat," and in a few minutes Madame was again fully equipped.

"Does this please you better, Willie?" She descended to the hall. "I think myself that I look a frump, but——"

"Aye, that's grand," cried he, heartily; and hearing his cheerful voice, and seeing him bustle about providing his own gear, and noting the alacrity with which he sprang to his seat and helped her into hers, she was persuaded that the look which had startled her in his yearning eyes, was due to a mere passing qualm or, more likely still, was the figment of her own imagination.

Lady Fanny Thatcher was at home when, an hour later, a dog-cart drove past her window, and, looking up, she had a glimpse of the Seafords, husband and wife, seated therein.

Lady Fanny had had Olivia in her thoughts a good deal that day. It may be remembered that she had had a letter from Kitty the morning before, and Kitty's letter had been in some respects so odd and unsatisfactory, so unlike those the child was in the habit of sending, that her mother would very much have liked to have been on sufficiently intimate terms with Olivia Seaford as to permit of her taking the latter's opinion upon it.

Olivia had been Kitty's chosen confidante—so Kitty said—during the past twelve months; Kitty had boasted that she “Told Olivia *everything*” (it was not always particularly pleasant to hear this, but parents must put up with such trifles, we know); and Lady Fanny's best hope was that expansiveness on the part of the speaker was hardly rewarded by the same meed of interest on the part of the hearer. In brief, she shrewdly suspected that, though the one might talk, it by no means followed the other listened.

Now and then, however, Kitty would let fall some pearls which had dropped from the lips of her princess, and these had seemed to indicate that Olivia, to whose natural abilities the elder lady had always done justice, could also exhibit good sense and good feeling on occasion.

“And she certainly does know Kitty”—Lady Fanny sighed and pondered. “If it had been any one but Mr. Ambrose,” pursued she further—and could not make up her mind.

Kitty's letter had been full of Ambrose from beginning to end. First there was the extraordinary luck of meeting him—“Just after I had posted my letter to you, the one I wrote at Didcot and posted in London”—then the wonderful triumph of carrying him off to Scarborough—(“Where I don't believe he had ever thought of going”!)—next, the handsome way in which he had been received by her relations and included in all their doings—and, lastly, there were effusive and slightly incoherent remarks about himself, and he was “Mr. A.” on the last page.

“Is there *nothing* but about that fellow?” growled the young lady's papa, losing patience at last.

But on second thoughts the colonel cheered up. Kitty's excitement meant nothing; the little goose was

always losing her head, and having a piece of really startling information to give, she naturally made the most of it. As for her taking Ambrose where he did not mean to go?—stop, how did she word it? where she did not “Believe he had ever thought of going”? “Fol-de-rol!” said Colonel Thatcher.

“He may choose to let her think so,” pursued the astute colonel, “but, mark my words, Philip Ambrose never gave out he was going to America and got no farther than Scarborough, without having his own reasons for doing so, and those reasons had nothing to do with our vain little Kitty. I’d like to see Olivia Seaford’s face when she hears about this letter—that’s to say, if she didn’t know before,”—and he threw himself in Willie’s way the same afternoon.

How he fared with Willie we know, and we know also, though Thatcher did not, to what he owed the agreeable prospect of a day in the stubble, over which he had cast many a longing eye.

He had told himself that Seaford would never ask him; that probably he had acquired the shooting with an eye to his City friends who, less lucky than himself, could not afford to go farther afield for their sport, and would make a fuss about a few partridges in a few fields. Up went the colonel’s nose at the idea—but now he viewed the matter in a different light. He was to have Seaford’s company and Seaford’s shooting, and Seaford was a damned good fellow. In the pleasure of rubbing and polishing up his old gun and cocking it to his eye, he gave no further thought to Philip Ambrose, and never requested to hear Kitty’s letter read again.

“The Seafords, did you say?” cried he, starting up from behind his newspaper, as Lady Fanny, who sat nearer the window, announced generally the advent of visitors. “Ha, come to tell me what hour we start to-

morrow? I have been expecting a message." And he hurried to the door.

"Our nearest neighbours," explained her ladyship to a couple left behind. "You noticed the house yesterday?"

"The house with the lovely garden?" A fashionable elderly woman, glad of any break in the boredom of a quiet country visit, looked up with the first signs of animation Mrs. Loring had evinced that day. "Then, my dear Fanny, you must positively arrange for us to see that garden. I love to see new places and——"

"And people," jeered her husband. "She calls it 'Places'; but give Edith a chance of running up new acquaintances (though Lord knows she has more than she can get through already, working at 'em day and night), and she'll drag you to the ends of the earth."

"Nonsense, Henry. Fanny, don't listen to him. He wouldn't care if he never saw a fresh face, and that is so dull. But do tell me about these—Seafords, is that the name?—just give me my cue before they come in," in a breathless undertone. "Are they desirable? Are you intimate? Is that place their own property? And are there any young men—for Kitty, you know?"

"There are no young men," said Lady Fanny, coldly. "For the rest, you will see for yourself"—as the door opened.

But though voices were heard outside, it was only the footman who entered, looking over his shoulder, and as no one followed, he made for a table and proceeded to set it conveniently for tea. Colonel Thatcher was exhibiting some trophies in the hall, one in particular which had only just been set up, and Mrs. Loring seized her opportunity.

"Am I to be civil, Fanny?"

"She means is she to ask them to call in South Street?" appended her interpreter.

"Do be quiet, Henry. I only desire to know Fanny's wishes—and whether we are to be chatty and friendly, or hold these people at a distance?"

"If Olivia Seaford does not hold you at a distance," for the life of her Lady Fanny could not repress the retort, "you are very safe to be friendly with her, Edith."

"And that's one for you," came in a whisper on Edith's other side. She said to herself that it was a pity Henry had not gone for that walk his cousin John invited him to.

And she thought so still more within the next few minutes when her practised eye discerned that the newcomers, who were being ushered in in Colonel Thatcher's best manner, were more than likely to receive in due course her parting formula, "I hope we shall see you in South Street!"

It is true that Willie alone might not have merited this reward. He was a fine-looking man, with a good-humoured manner which passed well enough—but Mrs. Loring had not yet learned that he was rich, and would have hesitated as to what amount of attention The Willow House (which was not a pretentious place, and had no deer park nor avenues—no *entourage*, in short) entitled him to on his own account—but taken in conjunction with his wife, all hesitation was soon at an end.

Olivia, reduced to her old purple coat and skirt, and only saved from being an utter frump in her own estimation by the hat with the shaded plumes, was in reality quite smart enough for a country call, and Mrs. Loring, who was also a dresser, took in at once the cut of her sleeve and hang of her skirt.

And what a face—what a figure—voice and manner too!

“I say, Edith was regularly flummerged, wasn’t she?” grinned the colonel in private afterwards. “She never thought we could produce such a fine lady in this little backwater of ours. Honest Willie did very well too”—after a pause. “Willie’s improved of late. It’s not only that he is half the size, but he seems to have pulled himself together in every way—oh, you’ve noticed it? Well, what do you make of it?”

“He is trying to please his wife,” said Lady Fanny, quietly.

To return to the drawing-room party. Satisfied by the demeanour of her hostess as well as by her own observations that she would not be committing herself to what she might repent of, the London lady threw herself *con amore* into what was going forward, and was, she confessed afterwards, astonished—really astonished at Fanny’s remark concerning her fair neighbour, which had prepared her for quite a different sort of person—“the sort of person you know who would stare at one through an eyeglass and let all one’s little efforts drop”—whereas Mrs. Seaford was charming and had the prettiest little hesitation in her manner—“so different from the assured manner of *some* young married women”—and so on, and so on.

Olivia on her part was grateful to Mrs. Loring for her presence, and yet more for her flow of talk. Now that she was in the Thatchers’ house, might hear at any moment the name of Philip Ambrose, and be called upon to bear her share in a disquisition on his doings and demerits, she was fain to put off the dreaded and yet longed-for moment.

Alone with Lady Fanny this would hardly have been possible. She must have asked after Kitty, and Kitty spelt Scarborough and Ambrose—even the presence of the two husbands would have been no bar to plain

speaking—but good breeding dictated general topics now, and it was not till second cups of tea were going round—"For the country does make one so hugely hungry," averred Mrs. Loring—that Olivia's host, while attending to her wants, addressed her in passing.

"You've heard the news from Scarborough?" said he, pleasantly.

"I heard you had had a letter from Kitty, yes. She wrote to me from the other place, near Didcot—the place she was at before."

"But you have not heard from her since? Oh, she's in high feather at Scarborough; thinks she has performed a mighty feat in carrying off Ambrose—I told your husband Ambrose was there too, didn't I? Our conceited little puss thinks she put a stopper on his American trip—well no, she didn't exactly say that, she didn't mention America at all, but *we* know——"

"Mr. Seaford is speaking to you, John." Lady Fanny touched her husband's elbow. "Oh, I beg your pardon," added she, with an apologetic look; and "Beg pardon," echoed Willie likewise—but though both withdrew as it were politely, their mutual object was accomplished. The colonel looked round, and the thread of his discourse was broken.

It was Olivia herself who resumed it presently.

"I suppose Mr. Ambrose found he could not afford the time to go with his friend," observed she, evenly. "It was a sudden thought; one is often obliged to reconsider sudden thoughts."

"Quite so. Just what your husband said. And Ambrose—we are talking of Professor Ambrose, Edith," to Mrs. Loring, who was too near not to be included in his remarks; "our neighbourhood has been honoured by having a celebrity within its boundaries for the past month."

"A celebrity?" Mrs. Loring, ever on the look-out for celebrities, pricked up her ears.

"You don't see him often in London," continued the colonel, with unction, "you don't catch a lion like him for your parties, I can tell you; you have to come down to a quiet little country place like this to unearth a swell like Philip Ambrose."

"Really? And is he here now?" ("And why was I not told before?" mentally ejaculated the lady. "People are so stupid"—and she racked her brains to think when and where she had ever heard the name of Ambrose.) "Henry?" she appealed to her husband, "Henry, John tells me that Professor Ambrose——"

"I know, but he is gone, my dear. It is rough on you, but it is so," rejoined Henry, sardonically. "You would have liked to meet the famous Ambrose."

"Of course I should."

"Even though you have not the ghost of an idea what he is famous for. Not the veriest ghost; come now, have you? No, no, Fanny, don't help her out,"—but Lady Fanny, albeit with a secret smile, could not let this go on.

"We women cannot be expected to understand scientific distinctions," observed she, adroitly. "Edith knows that Mr. Ambrose is one of the men of the day."

"Bet she didn't—till now."

"And she would naturally be interested in meeting any one whose name is so much to the front at present."

"And would invite him to call in South Street."

"Henry, Henry, you are too bad;" the smile was now an open one on Lady Fanny's face. "You are incorrigible. He always was a tease, was he not, Edith? And men never understand hero-worship."

"What's that? Hero-worship?" struck in her

husband, who during the above little sparring match had found himself drawn a bye, and forced to accord an unwilling appearance of listening to Willie Seaford who was talking on in his far ear (Olivia was quietly drinking her tea, and examining the pattern on the cup). "What nonsense is Fanny talking about hero-worship? My dear, I should hope you're too old for that sort of tomfoolery."

"Too old? Gracious, John *is* rude to you, Fanny;" Mrs. Loring reddened and tried to look as if three out of the five people present did not know that she was some years her cousin's senior—"pray, John, since you are so matter-of-fact, at what age is hero-worship permissible?"

"At no age." Suddenly the colonel's eyes shot fire. "At no age," repeated he, sharply. "It's a rotten system—never mind—never mind if that's not the word; one word's as good as another if you know what I mean—I say, it's a rotten notion, if you like that better, and leads to—humph, *I* know what it leads to, if you don't;"—and "India" was writ large upon his brow.

"You shocking man! Call him to order, Fanny. He has all sorts of horrid ideas in his head; and really what started them—could it only have been your innocent suggestion of hero-worship, my dear?"

"John has so many hobby-horses that one can't always avoid mounting him on one,"—but Lady Fanny's mild accents were interrupted by the vivacious Londoner, now more in her element than she had yet found herself under her cousin's roof. With an amused air she turned to Olivia. "At least *you* have not out-grown hero-worship, my dear?" The "My dear" might have been resented, but at the moment a sun-ray darted across the speaker's face, cruelly showing up its

time-worn ravages, and Olivia had an odd sense of being very, very young as she looked upon it. "Give us your views, for I am sure you must have views," proceeded the old lady, cheerfully unconscious of the trick the cruel beam was playing her. "I mustn't own to *my* feelings after Colonel Thatcher's severity," with a glance at him, "but——"

"I am afraid mine would meet with like condemnation." ("They have already done so," reflected Olivia—but she spoke with spirit, and Willie told her so afterwards. "It was awkward, too, when, of course, they were all thinking of Ambrose," added he sagaciously.)

"Then we three must combine against the three husbands;" again Lady Fanny's well-bred accents performed their gracious intermediary part. "We refuse to be daunted by John's contempt and Henry's sarcasm—and Mr. Seaford, I daresay, sides with them, though he is too polite to us to say so? If Kitty were here she would——"

"Beat you all at the game. That she would. Give you points, too," nodded Kitty's father. "The little goose is simply raving mad with delight over having got Ambrose all to herself at Scarborough."

"At Scarborough! Oh, the great man is at Scarborough!" cried Mrs. Loring, quickly. "He avoids London, but goes into society at Scarborough! Oh, really! He—he must be rather a peculiar personage by all accounts."

"Very peculiar." The colonel, with his eyes firmly fixed on the last speaker, was nevertheless mentally addressing other auditors, as they were well aware. "We don't know what our enigmatical friend is up to, but apparently Kitty does. She has got the hero-worship fever badly, ladies; and her letter to her mother ——"

"A poor little girl's letters to her mother—John, I am ashamed of your showing them up for ridicule," cried Lady Fanny, indignantly. "No, I will not have it," as he endeavoured to strike in again, his face brimming with mischief. "I will not have my poor little Kitty laughed at. Her enthusiasms have always been—you know?" The speaker turned to Olivia, not perhaps without a little human satisfaction in doing so, for, after all, one's daughter is one's daughter, and she had been a good deal tried by the said enthusiasms. "So that we cannot wonder at a little *furore* over such a really distinguished person as Mr. Ambrose," she wound up, dismissing the subject—and since the "Distinguished person" was out of reach and nothing was to be gained by further discussion of him, Mrs. Loring was ready also to turn to happier hunting-grounds.

"So it appears we were right, and there really is something going on up yonder?" quoth Willie, the dog-cart having started on its return journey. "But I can't think a man like Ambrose——" and he flicked his whip dubiously.

"What is it that you can't think?" inquired Olivia.

She was chilly even beneath the cloak which his careful hand had drawn around her in the hall, and she would fain have sat there cold and silent, thinking over all she had heard; but as this could not be, it was better to learn what was in Willie's mind than to have him also ruminating and evolving his own deductions.

"Why, that a clever, an ultra-clever fellow, an out-and-outer who makes it his business, and trades on it, and is nothing if he isn't it——"

"Pile it up, Willie;" Olivia found she could laugh, but it was a hard, unmirthful laugh. "We have got at your true opinion of Mr. Ambrose at last," continued she, leaving off as suddenly as she had begun.

“Oh, you don’t agree with it, I suppose?” He looked along the side of his horse and took off a fly with the loop of his lash, but Olivia was not deceived; there was, yes, there was a change in his tone; it might have been as if he had been arrested by hers.

And certainly a fortnight ago she would have spurned his description, and even now felt vexed with it.

Vexed? That was the word. It did not hurt, it did not wound, it did not dispose her to flare up in denial nor sit mute in sullenness—it merely expressed in bald simplicity a terrible suspicion that now and again had lurked within her own bosom and for which she had hated herself.

Ambrose had not a noble character, neither had he an endearing disposition.

He could be pleasant, wonderfully pleasant, when he chose; and he could make the person he wished to please esteem his doing so the more because it was a direct, exclusive, almost secret bond between them he thus sought to establish; but in himself, and apart from those brilliant intellectual powers which dazzled and subdued the world, what was he?

Willie, with no desire to belittle a distinguished man—Willie, incapable of paltry detraction arising from a sense of ill-usage—Willie, who was simply talking away with his usual ease and absolute truthfulness when alone with his wife, said Ambrose was “Nothing”. Olivia experienced a kind of constriction of the heart.

That strange, subtle gift of fascination which a virile nature can exercise over another, not necessarily a weaker, had held her as it were in a vice while daily and hourly exerted; but even then she had had moments of escape, only alas! to be recaptured. And she had allowed herself to be recaptured—it was that which tormented her now.

Yet Willie said—she paused, she longed to hear him say it again—the shock, even the pain of it was passing; the place he had struck throbbed with the dulled sense of a nerve which has been touched, but which is sinking almost peacefully to rest again.

“Willie?”

He leaned towards her in silence.

“You thought I minded what you said just now, Willie, but—I did not. About Mr. Ambrose, I mean. You spoke as if you did not care for him, although you admired him? I think—I do the same. But I—have not always done so. I have not always seen him in the light I—begin to do. Go on, Willie; what were you going on to say when you thought I stopped you?”

“Only this”—he had the supreme tact to exhibit neither surprise nor satisfaction but to proceed evenly as though taking up the dropped thread where he left it—“only that a fellow who puts a high price on himself for his cleverness and rather gives other fellows to understand they’re dirt if they can’t cope with him in that line, isn’t the sort of man to marry—eh?” She had allowed a soft ejaculation to escape, but no second utterance followed.

“I suppose it’s marriage Kitty is thinking of,” proceeded he, looking straight in front of him. “She wouldn’t see it in the same light, of course. And she may think that she would do very well. And the aunt would tell her that if she can nobble a celebrity like Ambrose——”

“Oh, Willie, dear!”

“I didn’t mean ‘Nobble,’ I meant, I meant—catch,” said he, flustered; “there’s no harm in ‘Catch,’ Olivia; and what I was going to say was, the aunt would tell Kitty that she would do far better with Ambrose than by hooking on to a younger man. Ambrose is safe to go

up even higher than he is already; he'll go to the very top of the tree—and that means position, and income, and all the rest of it."

"Yes, I suppose it does." She drew the rug round her, and bent over the side for some moments.

"But I don't fancy the old colonel and Lady Fanny would care for such a match," continued Willie, driving carefully past a team of waggons on the road, "and I don't fancy they have even got as far as receiving the idea into their heads. He thought it a good story, and that it would make you sit up——"

"Me!"

"Aye, you, I saw what he was up to, and you got out of it famously—never turned a hair,—and Lady Fanny was angry with him and ashamed of him—but she was the only one of the two who took it seriously. She didn't half like that letter of Kitty's."

"So I thought," said Olivia, slowly.

"Did you see how neatly she turned it off by a hit at Kitty's 'Enthusiasms'? That was meant for you. And there was a lot of truth in it, you know." He broke off, waiting for her to speak, but as she did not: "Well, dear," he proceeded, kindly, "you didn't mind, did you? Old Thatcher has always been a little queer about you and Ambrose, ever since that first night when he felt himself bowled out. He admires you awfully in a rum sort of way—I am always amused by it. If you are decently civil, he is ready to fall on his knees, but ——" he paused and laughed.

"But in general he would like to humble me and annoy me?" said she, bitterly.

"I suppose that's it. Some people are made so." He nodded a philosophical assent. "It's not worth bothering about."

Olivia struggled with herself, but her rejoinder, when

it came at last, was clear and steady. "No one can afford to despise the opinion even of a foolish old man, and I think, perhaps, I have been a little too indifferent—that is, I am sorry that Colonel Thatcher should couple my name and that of Mr. Ambrose even in his thoughts. But you said I did not show this, Willie?" A sudden, and to his ears pathetic, eagerness manifested itself. "You did say so, didn't you?"

"I'd swear it." He put out his left hand and clasped hers. "You showed nothing—to them; don't be afraid, for I was watching."

"Watching, Willie?"

"For you, yes." Again the hand pressed hers, and silence fell between them, which lasted till they reached their own door.

Then, "Well, here we are," said Willie, lightly. "Now, dear, wait a moment till I can help you down; don't be in a hurry," as she stood up impetuously, and he threw the reins to a groom who had run round to the horse's head.

"It's been awfully jolly going out like this," whispered he, holding her hands a moment longer than he needed; "we'll go again, shan't we?" And though he had only a little nod for answer, he followed her inside contentedly.

"Very nice neighbours, I'm sure," pronounced Mrs. Loring the same evening at dinner. She had not been able to say so before except to Lady Fanny, the two gentlemen having disappeared after the Seafords' departure. "A nice, sociable couple; it made quite a pleasant little interlude their coming this afternoon, John."

"It was lucky we were at home," rejoined he, amicably. He was always afraid of the fine London

lady's despising the neighbourhood, and had already reckoned on the impromptu tea-party as so much to the good on his side of the question.

"The husband, perhaps, not quite up to the wife?" continued Mrs. Loring, interrogatively. "Not *quite*, is he?"

"Oh, Willie's a good sort. Well, no, perhaps he's not—but I don't know; he has a great-uncle a dean," said the colonel, with an air of making a point—and, indeed, it was only the thought of the partridges on the morrow which wrung the dean out of him, for as a rule he had a supreme contempt for everything about Willie Seaford except himself. ("No family, none whatever," he was wont to say; and when in peevish humour would add, "It's simply sickening the way these City men overrun this part of the world, and buy up every decent place within reach.")

Now, however, he looked resolutely into Mrs. Loring's face and produced poor Willie's one creditable relation, of whom Willie himself never spoke.

"Ah, really? A dean. But a man is not born a dean, you know. You remind me, John, of my niece Evelyn, who married a Mr. Begg, and when people ask who the Beggs are, she says her husband has a relation a general!"

"Humph!" said he, not relishing the simile. "I can't give people birth if they haven't it—no more can your niece. All I can say is there is a member of Willie Seaford's family who has attained a good position, and as for himself he's a confoundedly good sort, and I wish there were more like him."

"But his wife, surely she——"

"Not a bit of her. We knew her parents; Fanny and I knew them at one time when Olivia was a child, pretty well. We lost sight of them afterwards till she

turned up here married to Seaford. They were a respectable old couple, nothing more."

"I noticed that Fanny called Mrs. Seaford by her Christian name."

"Why, aye, you can hardly drop the name, though really until lately we have not seen much of the Seafords. Since Kitty grew up we have been more intimate; Kitty has a craze for Olivia Seaford; makes a perfect fool of herself about her."

"Girls often do that, you know."

"So Fanny says, and that it will pass off—but I don't know; it's a monstrous nuisance while it lasts anyhow."

"I should certainly have thought Mrs. Seaford a well-born woman," ruminated Mrs. Loring aloud. "And I am not generally mistaken. She has quite the best manner, and, what one always notices, she can remain out of a conversation without looking 'Out of it,'—you know what I mean? I remarked on this to Fanny, and she assured me that she had often said the same."

"I daresay." The colonel sipped his wine. "Fanny's as silly as the rest of them, and that's the simple truth. Olivia Seaford can twist them all—all but me—round her little finger. They put her on a pedestal, and I call her their divinity. That riles Kitty, but it does good—sometimes. As for her husband, and that Ambrose you heard us talking about——"

"Your celebrity?—your famous man?"

"*Our* celebrity?" echoed the colonel, indignantly. "Ambrose is the world's celebrity! And it's downright ignorant of you, Edith—well, well," as she strove to insert an apology—"but just you ask about Ambrose when you go back to London. Just you do that, and you'll hear what's said; you'll find he's thought as much of there as anywhere."

“And he admires Mrs. Seafood?”

“Bless my soul, Henry, I never heard that before. Where did you pick up that, ha-ha-ha?” Suddenly Colonel Thatcher turned from his neighbour, and in the most natural manner imaginable—or so he thought—threw himself into a lively duologue which was going on between the other two. “What a preposterous—what a fellow you are,” cried he, with vociferous applause. “You should keep him in better order, Edith”—and between laughter and disclaimers and general joviality Edith’s question got so completely shunted that it could never again get on to the rails, try as she might.

To himself the colonel was saying: “After all, it’s no business of Edith Loring’s, and she has a devil of a tongue. I daresay Fanny would be down on me for what I said as it is—and Madam Olivia was on her best behaviour to-day; it would be playing it rather low down on her to tell tales the moment her back’s turned. She’s but a girl after all,” mused he, turning his wine-glass round and round thoughtfully. “Why, she’s two years younger now than Fanny was when I married her!”—and the recollection so softened him that when Olivia’s name next recurred in conversation he merely cocked his nose in the air, looked significantly at his wife, and as he assured her afterwards gave the subject the “Go-by”.

The next day was fine and the colonel early astir. He would have scorned to allow that the prospect of going after “A few measly partridges” excited him, but he was heard tramping about his little dressing-room long before his usual hour, and appeared at breakfast in a strange old suit a world too tight for him which Lady Fanny had fondly deemed given away long before.

“My dear John!”

John hastily drew up his chair to the table, affecting not to hear.

"Was it necessary to put on such very—very——" She ran a disparaging eye up and down him as she spoke. "I do not believe that you have worn that coat for years! And really——"

"I haven't gone shooting for years, if you force me to admit it," said he, "and I don't keep an overflowing wardrobe, my dear. I had to get out any old things, and nobody will see me but you and Henry. As for Henry, he's no dandy."

"It does not matter for Henry, certainly."

"Who does it matter for, then? Edith will never see me, as she breakfasts upstairs; and I can slip in while you're out in the afternoon if you're so particular—but I should have thought I did well enough," and he stretched out his arms and stroked them.

"Won't Mr. Seaford think you——"

"What, *Willie*?" The colonel roared. "I'll say that for Willie Seaford, he's no more like a City man about clothes, than I am myself. I should say he never knows what he has on after it's once on his back. He's well turned-out, because he goes to a good tailor and pays a rattling bill—but I never knew any fellow I should less mind seeing me a guy. I suppose I am a guy in them, eh?"—and he looked shamefacedly down at himself unable to keep up bravado any longer. He had known all along that his shrunken limbs and bent shoulders showed sadly in the skimpy old suit.

"What's that? What's John saying?" demanded a new voice from the doorway. "Good Lord, John!" and the speaker stopped dead, staring at his host.

And now it was well to see what kind of a wife old John Thatcher had. "We were laughing together over his odd appearance when you came in, Henry," said

Lady Fanny, with her easiest smile. "John thinks any old things are good enough for going over a few stubble-fields in an unfrequented district, and he has routed out these. What time do you start, John?"—and she handed her husband his coffee, and inquired into Henry Loring's tastes respecting his, and was so taken up with the breakfast and the post, and this thing and that, that the colonel's poor old face gradually lost its redness, and he was talking away quite big again about the partridges ere the meal was over.

Willie Seaford on his part had also his preparations to make for the day's sport, but these did not relate to any material considerations, not even to the luncheon—as to which he knew the redoubted Jack Malcolm's instructions would be rigidly carried out; almost too rigidly perhaps, but not for worlds would he have hinted this—it was other and entirely different matters which occupied Willie's mind and drew a line across his brow. "Thatcher will tackle me when we're alone. He is still on the scent. He has made up his mind that there is something, or has been something, in that Ambrose affair, and won't rest till he has wormed out what. I saw him looking at her. He thinks she has fretted herself thin—stop, I have it"—and his countenance cleared up. After another brief reverie: "I think that will settle your business, old boy," exclaimed he, briskly—and when the time came for setting off, and Olivia was at the door to see the start, he leaned down over the side of the dog-cart towards her: "I'm going to have some fun out of old Thatcher to-day," he whispered, laughing.

It was during the midday halt that the fun came. Luncheon was over, and the sportsmen were smoking luxuriously on a sunny bank with their caps over their eyes—Willie would have preferred the shade on his own

account, but had an intuition that the warmth of a blazing September sun was grateful to the rheumatic old back at his side—and he now addressed his companion with a contemplative air: "This isn't half bad when you can get nothing better, colonel."

"It's excellent, Seaford. Suits me down to the ground, this quiet pottering along and picking up a bird or two as you go." ("He mustn't think I rate it *too* high. A man who has gone after big game in India—but after all, this is very enjoyable, and why should I not own it?") "On a day like this too," murmured the colonel, indefinitely.

"I have half a mind to go in for more of this kind of thing, and give up my moor, that is, my part of a moor, in Scotland," proceeded Willie, knocking the ashes out of his pipe and looking at it. "If I could get any really good partridge shooting hereabouts"—he paused.

"I doubt your doing that, though; every bit is snapped up—still, of course, you got this."

"This? Oh, this hardly counts," said Willie, laughing, and well aware that the other shared his opinion; "what I meant was something good enough to take the place of my Scotch trip. The fact is unless Olivia will go to Stronafalloch with me another time——"

"Ah!" escaped the colonel. He could scarcely believe his ears. There was a meditative, confidential air about the speaker which seemed, which really seemed, as if it might be induced by—what on earth was he going to say? There was almost an angry sensation in the old soldier's breast—"Hang it all, sir, a man should not complain of his wife without *very* good reason for doing so."

"It's beastly selfish of me to go without her; and what's more, I don't enjoy it half so much as I should

if she were with me," ran on Willie, placidly. "She's been awfully good about it always, and never would hear of my giving it up, but now she says——"

"Says?"

"That I mustn't leave her again;" he laughed a shy, pleased laugh. "She is willing even to rough it—but she can't rough it, you know; she hasn't got the stamina. Stronafalloch is a lonely bit of country—a splendid moor, but nothing else. I don't know that I should be justified—of course I could give it up, only the fact is, well, anything would be better than—you see how it is? Now, tell me honestly, you don't think her looking well, do you?"

"I—I—'pon my word," stammered the colonel, utterly surprised at the turn things had taken, "now you speak of it, we did say to each other, my wife and I, that Mrs. Seaford was not—not looking——"

"You noticed it? I'm glad I asked you; I wanted another opinion; thought it might be my own fancy, you know. The only women I've been seeing lately have been such buxom creatures that the contrast——" he shook his head ruefully. "Olivia comes of a delicate stock, all nerves and sensations; and it takes so little to pull her down, that directly she gets moping"—the colonel looked at him keenly—"she loses flesh and colour and everything. I saw it the first night I arrived, and she owned herself that she never did as well as when I was here to look after her."

"We have sometimes wondered that Mrs. Seaford should care to stay on here by herself while you were away. This neighbourhood is good enough at most times of the year, but in August——"

"She's no wiser than the rest of us, colonel. When she likes a thing she says it suits her—and so do you and I. She likes her house, and her garden, and the

quiet here when everybody else is away—oh, I say, you know I didn't mean to be rude, sir."

"Quite so. We are all aware of Mrs. Seaford's proclivities," rejoined Colonel Thatcher, grimly, "but since she can enjoy the advantages you speak of all the year round—for it don't much signify whether people are here or not, if one chooses not to mix with them——"

"We are always honoured by your and Lady Fanny's friendship, colonel. If I have given the impression that we are not, it is my clumsiness," said Willie Seaford, with a quiet dignity that became him marvellously, "and I think you have known us long enough and well enough not to put any misconstruction——"

"My good fellow, I ask your pardon a thousand times. No one could know you and think anything of you but what was—come now, no more compliments; we understand each other,"—and Colonel Thatcher both looked and spoke cordially—"we understand each other, and our wives seem to understand each other, which is still more to the point," chuckled he. "Lady Fanny, and of course Kitty, but she's hardly in the running yet—Lady Fanny then has a very warm corner in her heart for your wife; may I be allowed to say she has a motherly feeling for her?—and it is *that* which makes her perhaps—perhaps a little—a little surprised—and—and sorry." Frightened at himself and at the *impasse* into which he had betrayed himself, the old man's pipe dropped from his mouth, and muttering something, he hurriedly occupied himself with replacing it.

"I can guess how Lady Fanny feels," said Willie, calmly. "My wife is very young—and thinks herself very old. She was never allowed to be a child—so in many ways she is still a child. I know her as no one

else does. First her parents, and then I, have done our best to spoil her. But we haven't spoiled her, though," his eyes smiled, "you and others think we have. Wait. The end isn't yet, colonel."

"I'm sure—I'm sure," stammered the colonel, much impressed—"Who would have thought he had it in him?" mentally—"we all admire Olivia"—in his flurry he called her "Olivia"—"and as I said, my womenkind think all the world of her; it is only that perhaps—a little—thoughtlessness"—his voice died away to a mumble.

"If I had understood her better at the first," continued Willie, dreamily, "I could have helped her more; but she seemed to me perfect, and—and that doesn't do, you know. A man shouldn't think his wife perfect, because then he leaves her alone to struggle with her—temptations."

"Temptations?" whispered the colonel to himself—but he had the wit to keep still and listen.

"I have encouraged her in every whim and fancy. I have let her off every disagreeable, and stood between her and every trouble," resumed Willie, still as if pursuing his own thoughts; "she herself has told me so, and told me I was harming her by it. When at the beginning she wanted to lead her own life, I ought not to have let her—I was older, and knew. I knew it was wrong,—that good women—and men too—oughtn't to live just for themselves—but I couldn't cross Olivia. My poor darling!" He appeared to have utterly forgotten Colonel Thatcher's presence.

The latter, however, felt uneasy and *de trop*. ("Almost as if I had no business to be here, by Jove!" he muttered. "I can't think it's Willie Seafood going on like that; and if Fanny could only hear him!")

"You're surprised, I daresay, sir?" quoth Willie,

rousing himself. "I've been speaking aloud, haven't I? But though I didn't mean to say all this, I'm not sorry that I have said it. I have often felt that I wished you could know—you and Lady Fanny—more of what is going on here. We're quite alone, we two—neither of us has a relation, that's to say a near relation in the world." ("What about the dean?" thought the colonel, but he did not dare put in a word.) "Not one we could go to for advice or sympathy or anything of that kind, at least," continued Willie, with a possible reference to the ecclesiastical dignitary in his own mind; "and if we had," he smiled faintly, "I doubt if Olivia—no, we must worry it out together. That's what I meant when I said I shouldn't leave her alone again, sir. She leans on me. God knows I am not much of a support, but if love can do it"—he dashed his hand across his eyes.

("Good fellow—good fellow," muttered the colonel, wiping his own.) Mutually they looked away from each other. . . . A long pause ensued.

"And now shall we start again?" It was Willie Seafood's strong, cheerful voice which broke the silence. "We've rested long enough, haven't we? Hi—you,—"

and he called up the keepers, and patted the dogs, who yawned themselves awake and yelped in response. "We'll take it easy, and leave off about four, if that suits you, colonel? That'll bring us each home for tea, eh? I'll drop you on the way?"

"You won't look in?"

But Willie gave him a laughing look. Not he. Olivia would be waiting.

CHAPTER XII.

OLIVIA CANNOT KEEP AWAY FROM THE THATCHERS.

AND Olivia was waiting, and experienced quite a little thrill of curiosity and anticipation as the dog-cart drew up.

She could not of course get at Willie's news, whatever it was, at once—for by tacit consent the name of Ambrose was eliminated from their public conversation; the aunts were not interested in him and Algy never mentioned him,—but she knew it would not be long ere the two could slip away by themselves, and she could bide her time till then.

Olivia had regained a measure of serenity within the past two days, for albeit the shock and displeasure occasioned by Ambrose's abrupt departure, together with the shame and dismay at her own conduct, was as poignant as before, something had happened—bear with her, reader—to make these feelings more tolerable. In fine, her vanity had been appeased, and a woman's vanity is hard to kill.

But how had this last been accomplished? By the very means which the angry Ambrose took to inflict as he deemed further mortification.

If he had carried out his threat of going to America, the Seafords would have continued to feel themselves as slightly treated as he meant they should—but he overdid his part, and the mystery of his *volte face* sug-

gested a new idea to Olivia. She fancied him suddenly awakened to the true extent of his feelings for herself, and fleeing from it.

Recollect that she knew nothing of Algy's insulting message, and had, therefore, no clue to the behaviour it gave rise to, until Kitty Thatcher's letters came; and that letter, whose exuberance annoyed Lady Fanny and excited her gossip-loving husband, shed a light over the whole affair to Olivia's mind, which, as we say, soothed her vanity and gave a fillip to her spirits.

At least all the folly was not on her side. At least he too had suffered and was suffering.

Poor man! It had come to this that she thought of Ambrose as "Poor man!"—and though she blamed him and in a sense despised him—telling herself that he and she had alike betrayed her husband's confidence and lowered his dignity, telling herself further that Willie's estimate of the false friend who had done this was a true one, and that she shared it—there was not that bitterness in looking upon the past that there had been.

She had no wish ever to see Philip Ambrose again; she earnestly hoped he had none to see her,—but there was a softness in her voice and an elasticity in her tread now, which had been lacking hitherto, and she took the old ladies, Willie's aunts—(they were his great-aunts, by the way, sisters of the dean, and a stiff and selfish old pair, who did not even recur to him as relations when lamenting the lack of such to Colonel Thatcher)—Olivia, we say, in the new-born amelioration of her feelings, escorted those ladies to the very spot where she and Ambrose were wont to sit, and desired Jenkyns to send them chairs.

This had taken place on the morning of the shooting day, and all through that day, Olivia had been more or less attentive and *en évidence*—not slipping out of

sight and appearing only at meals as she had been guilty of doing more than became a hostess during the earlier portion of the visit.

“Positively she has not vanished once to-day!” nodded Aunt Jemima to Aunt Louisa, their old heads close together under the elm-tree, and their old eyes following Olivia who was tying up hollyhocks almost within earshot—and in consequence, “Oh, don’t think of us,” cried both together, when tea was over and Willie stood up, looking as if he wanted his wife to stand up too—“go with him, my dear.”

So now for her reward. The smoking-room to which the two repaired forthwith, was one of the most luxurious rooms in Willie Seaford’s luxurious house. It was large and wood-panelled to the beams. There were as few hangings as possible, and the cushions of the chairs, which were broad and low and supremely comfortable, were changed and aired so frequently as to keep the atmosphere fresh—which freshness was further secured by windows which opened at every point, and a huge fireplace in which a fire constantly burned.

The latter now threw a glancing light on all within its radiance, and a couple of shaded lamps added their rosy glow—so that a more inviting domain for a man to enter on an autumn evening at the close of a shooting day, could not have been imagined.

“Tired, Willie?” Olivia drew her own chair to the other side of the hearth, settled her dainty feet on one of the iron dogs, which was just the height for a footstool, and shaded her face with a letter in her hand.

“Tired? Not a bit. I don’t know, though,” appended he, ensconcing himself opposite; “somehow I do feel glad to sit down. It’s walking under your pace that does it; and the air here doesn’t spurt you along

as it does on the moors. Heigho!" and he sank in, and laid back his head, puffing happily.

"I suppose the old colonel enjoyed himself?" tried she next.

"If he didn't, it wasn't my fault. I let him have the first wire in whenever I could, and liquored him up at luncheon—oh, the old boy was as festive as possible, and awfully grateful and all that when we parted. He really was a pleasant companion too, poor old chap."

"And—and didn't introduce any disagreeable subjects?" She stooped forward and replaced a log upon the fire.

"Disagreeable subjects? Oh, you mean—'pon my word I forgot all about that—you mean Ambrose?"

"You thought he might take the opportunity——?"

"So I did, and was all prepared, but somehow it never came up. We had a long talk after luncheon, too, and he was nice and friendly—seemed to me he was particularly friendly"—he ruminated, smoking slowly, then took his pipe out of his mouth and looked at it, "I fancy he knows that Ambrose can't be a particularly agreeable subject to us, so kept off it, which was just as well, eh?"

"Oh, yes." But Olivia felt bitterly disappointed. She had made so sure of his having something to tell, even something that was absurd and exasperating, even something that she would be called on to resent—but no news at all? "I thought you said *you* were going—but I daresay it was better not—only why did you say——?"

"That I would have some fun out of him? Because I fully meant—that's to say, I made so sure he would begin, that I had it all pat,—but as he didn't, I—fact is, I never thought of it."

"Do you think he—he could not quite have for-

gotten, you know, when only yesterday he was so full of Kitty's letter? I must say I was rather hoping there would have been another letter, something to amuse us,"—Olivia forced a little laugh,—“Kitty has fits of writing; and when she once starts, bombards you with a regular cannonade. I quite expected the colonel would have met you with a fresh burst of intelligence.”

“Never said a word;” he shook his head and appeared to reflect. “No, he never said a word; but if you were to go over and see Lady Fanny, she's the one—a single word from her is worth all his twaddle. And, by the way, he reminded me of some book, or paper, you promised her. Why not take it yourself? She'll be alone to-morrow; the Loring's leave early; and she would be very likely to show you Kitty's letter, or might even have a new one. There's your excuse, if you want to see it.”

“It was this month's number of the *Gardening Annual*,” said Olivia, referring to her promise; “it has an article about chrysanthemums, which Lady Fanny thought might be useful to their man. Yes, I could take it.”

“And go by yourself, and have a good talk,” said he, eagerly, “she's a nice woman, and has always been nice to you. Couldn't you,” he hesitated, “couldn't you make a little more of a friend of her? From something the colonel said”—Olivia threw him a quick look—“Hang it all, I don't see why I shouldn't tell you what he said,” resumed he, with animation, “and though it isn't exactly news, it's nice to hear, so you shan't say I've brought home nothing; it was this, that Lady Fanny had always ‘A warm corner in her heart’ for you. There! Oh, and there was something about ‘Motherly feelings,’ if he might venture to put it so; what do you think of that?”

"I think, Willie," Olivia looked at him with a penetrating eye, "I think that Colonel Thatcher would not have spoken so unless——"

"Well, I only—I only——" said he, alarmed.

"Only said something you couldn't help saying, something to show what a foolish husband you were,"—she had risen, crossed over to him, and stood now by his side, her hand resting gently on his head—"don't think hardly of me, dear, if I ask you not to do it again. Not just now, at least; wait till I am more worthy of you, Willie; I am going to try to be that. And meantime, you won't——?"

"I promise I won't. I'm awfully sorry, but I did—did talk a little about you to-day. I don't know how it was, it just came out. I think it may have been because the colonel looked so old," he reflected, half to himself, "such a little, shrivelled-up, old bit of a man with a kind face—not at all the usual fussy, inquisitive face I hate to meet; Olivia, I do think we might be on better terms than we are with both him and his wife."

"I will go over and call on Lady Fanny to-morrow," said she,—but directly she had said it, she felt herself a traitor.

And yet she was not a traitor. Her husband's unshaken fidelity and nobility touched her very soul; he loved her so that he could not help speaking of her—babbling of her if she must so call it,—yet when taxed with the overflow, and knowing that it vexed and pained her, out it came, the truth. Willie could not lie—not even for her. Intuitively she felt that another would; that Ambrose would have found words wherewith to evade her perspicuity, or would have laughed off the incident. Ambrose fell before her husband.

Yet again she would fain hear about Ambrose; and to go to Lady Fanny now, now that she could do so

with a certain ease of mind, and gather any information the latter could give which would be secretly agreeable and flattering to receive, seemed harmless enough. It would please Willie, and please the Thatchers, and please herself—so why not go?

Accordingly Lady Fanny, who was alone the next afternoon, as predicted, beheld to her surprise the Seafords' big barouche drive up with only Olivia in it, and Olivia did not merely drop a note or a parcel as might have been expected, but was presently seen descending the carriage-steps by the other who was peeping from the background.

"Dear Olivia, this is very nice." Her ladyship advanced with both hands held out, and the above greeting on her lips. "And I am all alone," continued Lady Fanny in tones of self-congratulation, "so you are doubly welcome, my dear; I so seldom have you to myself."

"I brought this;" Olivia produced the *Gardening Annual*, and opened it at the article on chrysanthemums. "I thought you might like to have it at once, as your men are probably busy——"

"My one little man," laughed Lady Fanny, "who thinks he can grow chrysanthemums, and about whose success I am by no means sure, is certainly busy, but will leave off whatever he is doing if he hears that you, the famous gardener of the neighbourhood, have deigned to take an interest in his new venture. It is really *very* kind, Olivia." She spoke, she could not help it, as if Olivia were a princess, a gracious being condescending from a superior sphere.

"And now that you are here," continued the elder lady, ringing the bell, "you won't hurry off, will you? You are not obliged to go home for tea? It shall come up at once."

"Thank you. Oh, no, I am not at all 'Obliged'; indeed I hoped you would ask me," rejoined Olivia, cheerfully. "I took the aunts and Algy for a drive, and dropped them at home before I came on here."

"And they won't wait for you? That's right. You must tell me about the aunts; perhaps I ought to have called on them?"

But Olivia had not come to talk about the aunts.

"They come to us every year, you know, Lady Fanny. If you are so kind as to call, no doubt they would be pleased, but they don't expect it; they know we are quiet people, and that our neighbours are all busy with their own visitors at this season."

"And the lame boy? By the way, Kitty writes that his people are at Scarborough. She met them at your house, you know; and I fancy they have been making rather friends with her. At seaside places every one meets every one some time or other."

"Algy told us they were there." It was not quite so easy now to speak unconcernedly, but Olivia was prepared. If only Lady Fanny would keep on, keep at it, now that she was on the right tack, and not be headed off by tea and bustle of table-setting? But alas! already her ladyship's eyes were wandering, for she had not the well-trained servants of The Willow House, and could not depend on an impromptu tea being up to the mark.

"Algy is to join them next week," continued Olivia, doggedly sticking to the point herself. "I daresay Kitty will find the girls—that's to say she may be glad of them to go about with, Mrs. Hothfield having no daughters."

"Yes, I think so; I fancy so,"—but Lady Fanny cast an anxious eye on the bread-and-butter, which was not cut as Olivia's would have been. The silver, too, looked

a little dim, since the strain of the Lorings' visit had prevented its being polished after the day of their arrival. ("I do hope Olivia won't notice it," reflected she; "the Seafords' silver is always so beautifully kept.")

"Does Kitty say anything about the Rushingtons?" Olivia started afresh, and mentally blessed the Rushingtons who offered a safe and neutral territory on which she could either take her stand or advance from as desired. "Have they done anything together?"

"No. Yes—that is, I think so;" but this time it was not material considerations which caused Lady Fanny to stammer and qualify her assertions, it was a sudden recollection of a passage in Kitty's letter, which passage was hardly—she had not herself liked it, and any one else would probably like it still less. The passage opened thus: "The Rushington girls are as jealous as they can be;"—(a racing pen evidently going at full gallop)—"they have done all they can to annex Mr. Ambrose, but he simply won't be annexed. It is splendid to see how he gets out of it. The other day, etc., etc."

"I am amused to find that Kitty plumes herself on having produced our friend Philip Ambrose at Scarborough;" all at once Kitty's mother, who had been halting between two opinions ever since the all-important missive came, made up her mind that she would at least tell Olivia parts of it, and see how they affected her? Olivia would know better than she if Kitty were in need of an admonition or even of a recall. "For really I am annoyed at all that nonsense about the Rushingtons," decided she; "of all things that kind of jealous rivalry is the worst for a girl. Kitty did not care a pin's point for Mr. Ambrose when he was here, and there was no one to make a fuss about him—for, of course, Olivia Seaford is on a plane by herself, and *her* doing it was

quite another thing—but now, because these other foolish girls egg her on,”—what mother does not think it is another mother’s children who egg hers on? Lady Fanny decided to take Olivia’s opinion on the point.

“You know what a little feather-brained puss it is,” said she, trying for a light tone, “and this is her first flight by herself into the world. We thought she would be safe with Mrs. Hothfield, who brought up her own two daughters admirably and married them well—but by Kitty’s account she lets her run about very much as she pleases. Of course young people do often give false impressions in their letters, and I don’t give credence to *all* Kitty says, but still——” She paused.

“You think that Kitty is having rather a lively time?” Olivia laughed with a girlish intonation that struck her auditor as curiously sympathetic. Somehow, she had been talking as to a contemporary of her own, as to an older person who would look askance upon “A lively time,” and her next accents showed this.

“I should wish my children to enjoy any pleasures that are natural to their age, any that are wholesome and innocent,” rejoined she, a shade stiffly, “but what I should *not* wish is that they should associate with their pleasures feelings of a—of a nature—to be frank, Olivia, the tone of Kitty’s letter does not altogether please me, and I have been wondering if it can be due to her mingling with companions who are not such as her father and I would approve of.”

“You mean the Rushingtons?”

“I do. You know them, and can say whether I am right in this conjecture or not?”

“That they are contaminating Kitty?” Again, there was a faint undertone of amusement, which Lady Fanny, who was deeply in earnest, did not quite like.

She made a restive movement, and half-regretted she had begun the conversation at all.

“If I knew exactly what it is that vexes you, I could better judge whether it is anything serious or not?” said Olivia—and now this changeable creature spoke and looked so sensibly, that the half-withdrawn confidence flowed back on the instant—“I really don’t think there is any harm in Amy and Florence Rushington—but, again, I don’t know, I don’t know them well enough; and it is extraordinary how sometimes the very girls whom one would least expect to be fast and objectionable——”

“That is it, that is just what I feel. And Kitty has mixed so little with people of that stamp, and is so apt to take the colour of those about her——”

“But, dear Lady Fanny, couldn’t you speak a little plainer? If we only deal in generalities——”

“I think the best thing I can do is to show you her letter”—and Lady Fanny, who half an hour before had determined that no living eye should ever rest upon her young daughter’s exuberant effusion, suddenly whipped it out of her pocket, where it had been carried about with her all day.

Having done so much, however, she paused and hesitated.

“Don’t show it me if you would rather not, Lady Fanny.” But Olivia’s eyes fastened greedily upon the envelope.

“Indeed, I would rather, much rather show it, it would be a relief to me, only——” Again she broke off with miserable indecision.

(“Now, I know I ought not to see that letter,” said Olivia, to herself. “It would be taking a mean advantage—it would be dishonourable, unfair—and yet I long to see it. It would tell me so much, and it would

tell me what I would learn in no other way. And as she offers it herself, it can't be my fault; even Willie could not say it was my fault.") Yet the next moment she motioned back her companion's outstretched hand with her own, and turned away her head. It was the thought of her husband which impelled her to do this.

"Well, yes, perhaps you are right,"—but Lady Fanny obviously felt herself rebuked and a little thrown back—"still, if I—and I am not usually indiscreet,"—and she drew herself up, for after all it was hardly Olivia Seaford's place—but better feelings prevailed.

"You are right, and I was wrong," owned she, frankly, "and forgive me for tempting you, dear Olivia. My excuse is that I am worried and anxious, but I ought not to have—however, I will confine myself now to telling you what I *may* tell without any breach of confidence. Kitty is running all over the place it seems, with the Rushingtons and Mr. Ambrose. There would be nothing in that, if it were not for the flighty, foolish tone she adopts about it. She seems to think they are making a sort of lion of Mr. Ambrose; and what I can't understand is why she should exult over checkmating them in their very natural wish for his society. Mr. Ambrose is not a young man, or this would be more explicable. How I thought you might help me, Olivia, is in your knowledge of his character—for though we originally made you and him acquainted, you have seen so much more of him than ever we have that you—is he a flirt?"

Suddenly Lady Fanny looked straight into Olivia's face, and all her carefully-uttered, well-chosen preliminaries gathered themselves up into the single curt demand.

It may be wondered how she dared to put it. The truth is that she had so dwelt upon the more recent

aspect of affairs, and so fretted herself over these from her own point of view, that she could now only think of Ambrose as the apple of discord between Kitty, the Rushingtons, and "The rest" (Kitty's phrase for other rivals in the background), and all other recollections and considerations were for the time obliterated. Lines Olivia had never seen before wrinkled her cheeks, and the sight of them softened Willie Seaford's wife, even as he had been softened by similar signs of age on the old colonel's face the day before. She did not permit either her incredulity or contempt to appear.

"Is Mr. Ambrose a flirt? That means"—began she soberly, as though reflecting,—but here the elder lady struck in again, unable to be patient.

"Not in the ordinary sense of the word, of course; I know enough of Philip Ambrose to dispose of that idea. But would he be likely to lead silly girls on to vie with each other for his notice—would he be amused by their competing for him? The idea is most unpleasant, but it really seems as if something of that nature were going on."

"It might be going on without his being the least aware of it. They would not show it openly, you know, Lady Fanny."

"You think so. You think they would have sufficient self-restraint? I should be so thankful if that were the case. Indeed, Olivia, I cannot tell you how it has annoyed and worried me, the thought of poor Kitty's childishness,—I am sure it would be only childishness, but then you see she is *not* a child, and no one will give her credit for—but you know Kitty, and you know Mr. Ambrose, and you do think he may not—not have seen anything?"

"I think it is far more likely that he has not seen anything than that he has," said Olivia, readily. "If

I may speak quite frankly, Lady Fanny, I should say that Mr. Ambrose would not trouble his head about the adoration——”

“That’s it; that is the very word for it!” cried Lady Fanny, delighted.

“Of a parcel of school-girls,” continued Olivia, smiling. “They would behave quite nicely, you know; they would not thrust it upon him——”

“No, no; they would not thrust it upon him.”

“And with his thoughts far away”—(“*Here,*” said the speaker to herself, but aloud it was), “with his mind at work on other subjects, their small endeavours would be felt no more, not so much as pin-pricks.”

“Still, I wish they would not make the endeavours,” murmured Lady Fanny, uneasily.

After a long pause she looked at Olivia with a new look. “There must be some attraction in Philip Ambrose which I am not able to discover. I confess I find him rather heavy on hand, difficult to interest in anything,—but then, I am an old woman, and not a clever woman, and he is at no pains to find topics I can talk about. With you, Olivia, it is different, and you, I can understand, might find—I believe you do find him agreeable?”

“Very agreeable—when he chooses, Lady Fanny.”

“And you saw a great deal of him when he was at the cottage lately?”

“He came up every day. He did a good deal of his work in our garden. Not exactly in writing, but in reading and preparation.”

“And talked it over with you?”

“Yes.”

“There is a glamour over genius, Olivia, that I know you—you would be keenly alive to. I can quite understand this; indeed I can understand it fully, and should

be the last person to—to misinterpret the—the sentiment. You believe this, do you not, my dear ? ”

“ Oh, certainly, Lady Fanny.” Olivia looked mildly surprised and expectant.

“ So that I know you will not take it amiss if I—but after all, why should I speak now ? He is gone, and it was not till after he had gone that I—that we heard anything. Oh ! it was nothing, a mere nothing ; but you know how every trifle gets abroad in a neighbourhood like this ”—running on rapidly, in terror of a gathering shadow on Olivia’s face—“ I detest mysteries, my dear ; all that was ever thought or hinted at was that Mr. Ambrose was a little more with you than was perhaps quite *convenable*, quite in accordance with old-fashioned ideas, while your husband was away. I should not have mentioned it, for really such gossip is not worth repeating, but for this last development of Mr. Ambrose’s character.”

“ But I thought we settled it that it was not Mr. Ambrose.”

“ So we did. And he is, I doubt not, as free from a suspicion of blame in the one case as in the other. And so are you, Olivia ; pray, pray do not think I meant to hint—but when one is young and absolutely unconcerned about appearances—all that I meant was, my dear, that perhaps appearances *are* worth considering sometimes—but, really, I have said more than I intended doing, and I can only ask you to——” She put out her hand, and Olivia’s met it half-way.

Strange to say, she did not feel angry, nor even perturbed. It was such a little thing of which Lady Fanny accused her, so much less a thing than that of which she accused herself. She had been somewhat “ Heedless of appearances,” and the neighbourhood had “ Old-fashioned ideas”. She almost smiled ; indeed, she did

smile,—though it was but a faint, rather pathetic little attempt which lay upon her lips, as her eyes sought the other's face. "I was wrong," she said, quietly, "and it is right and kind and wise of you to tell me so. I ought to have thought of what you say for myself, but I did not. If that is an excuse, Lady Fanny, please accept it"—but her heart smote her as she spoke.

It was so easy to pacify her kind old friend, so easy to content her simple-minded husband, so easy to toss her head at a chattering neighbourhood and impertinent servants—so hard to lie to herself.

Nevertheless, there was nothing apparent but a softly-flushed face. Lady Fanny stooped forward and kissed it.

"We will never mention that troublesome man again, Olivia."

"Oh, but I must hear what Kitty has to say next about him, and you must not think of Mr. Ambrose as a tabooed subject"—a very devil of audacity prompted Olivia to speak out gaily and boldly—"it is quite putting the cart before the horse that *he* should be blamed for *our* absurdity. Mayn't I come over again soon, dear Lady Fanny?"

Of course she might; Lady Fanny could hardly let her go as it was; and there was kissing in the drawing-room and kissing in the hall; and cautions against taking cold on the one hand, and assurances on the other; and out came the older lady to the doorstep to look at the sky, and hope that the rain would keep off till her dear Olivia got home, and as dear Olivia had barely a mile to drive, there ensued laughing protestations; and, finally, a word over the carriage-door which was not for the footman to hear; and at last a final wave of hands within and without, and the great visit was over.

"Most successfully over," Willie said, when he heard the history of it. So Lady Fanny was affectionate and confidential, and had pressed Olivia to go again? And she had had it out about Kitty's letter and all the rest of it? And there was nothing new about Ambrose, he supposed?

"Algy will be the person to tell us if there is anything to tell about Mr. Ambrose," said Olivia to this; "it will be odd their meeting at Scarborough: I suspect Algy will be a little surprised."

"Doesn't he know, then?"

"We agreed that there was no need to tell him, you know. It was better to say as little as possible about Mr. Ambrose's odd behaviour, and Algy never cared for him. Besides——" she paused.

"Well?"

"It would be no bad thing for Mr. Ambrose to see we had not talked about him or his movements, considering that he treated us with so little ceremony."

"I see. When does the boy go?"

He was to go on the following Saturday, that day being Wednesday. On Friday, Olivia was over again at the Thatchers' door.

She was going quite openly this time to hear if Kitty had written anew? She had made her husband invite the colonel for another day's partridge shooting——

"But, I say, it won't stand another whole day so soon," objected he.

"Have him for a couple of hours in the afternoon then;"—and so it was arranged—and this time Lady Fanny had actually been herself coming to The Willow House if she had not been forestalled.

Olivia went early, having seen off her aunts, who were departing; and the day being fine, she suggested a drive instead of a drawing-room conference.

Olivia was not quite so sure of herself as she had been on the former occasion, when Lady Fanny's flank movement had been met in a manner that did credit to her opponent's *aplomb*. Olivia was of the nature of those who can make an apt reply at the moment and tremble afterwards.

On thinking over the interview she wondered at herself; at her calmness, her composure. She could not be so phlegmatic again; she feared to be so tried again—and yet she could not keep away from the Thatchers' house.

And they were scarcely off in the carriage ere her companion began. "We have had another letter, Olivia, and in the same strain, only worse—that is, more tiresome and incomprehensible than the first. I—to confess the truth, I have not shown it to John."

"No, really?" said Olivia, with interest—and then looked for more.

"It is fuller than ever of Mr. Ambrose; what he does, what he says, what he thinks. The Rushingtons figure largely in it too, but always in connection with him. He is the central point round which they all revolve. He goes with them everywhere—or at least everywhere that Kitty thinks worth mentioning—and any new people who come to her aunt's house or whom she meets elsewhere are only incidentally referred to as being 'So delighted to meet Mr. Ambrose,' or 'So struck by some remarks of Mr. Ambrose'. It is really rather too much, is it not?"

"Only that we all know Kitty," smiled Olivia—though inwardly she winced ever so slightly, picturing to herself the unhappy victim of this misplaced riot of enthusiasm.

How he must hate it—how it must grate on him and irritate him! Yet perhaps as a refuge from his own thoughts, his own sad and bitter thoughts, he found it

useful? Yes, doubtless *that* was his object, first in going to a noisy pleasure resort, and next in staying there; a place where he was involved in a senseless whirl of trivial merry-making, foreign to his tastes at any time, and especially obnoxious at the present moment.

"Oh, yes; we know Kitty," rejoined Kitty's mother, with an impatient little sigh, "and if I had Kitty here, I could soon bring her to reason, I know. She is sometimes a little difficult to manage, but she generally listens to me in the long run—that is, she did until—but it was not your fault, Olivia, that you fascinated my poor little girl and perhaps drew her away—but no matter, I am sure I wish she had you now to talk to. I don't fancy Mrs. Hothfield has any influence."

"How much longer does she stay at Scarborough?" Olivia quietly put aside the digression. More, she tried to put aside her own feelings, and enter into those of a harassed parent who had not now even her husband to consult with. She fell back on a practical inquiry and made it in a practical manner: Lady Fanny rose to the bait at once.

"That is another thing. She wishes to go to the Rushingtons after she leaves her aunt. Now, the Rushingtons—it is kind of them to ask her, but from what you say of them—what? But, my dear Olivia, you certainly did give me to understand that you declined to vouch for the Rushington girls, and in fact knew very little about them?"

"That is true, Lady Fanny—but I also said I knew no harm of them."

"No harm says so very little; gives one very little confidence, my dear. And if that is all you can say, and since apart from your knowledge of the family we have absolutely none, I cannot think it desirable that Kitty should accept their invitation."

"Well, no, I don't suppose it is," acquiesced Olivia frankly, and had opened her lips to proceed, when the older lady struck in again with energy.

"Yet, she *will* go; she is bent upon it, I can see by her letter. It is a mere form her asking our permission. No doubt she has told them so already."

"Can you not say she is wanted at home?"

"But she is not wanted, unluckily. We are about to have a little painting and papering done, it has been delayed till now, owing to the Loring's visit, and cannot be put off any longer. The men are to begin to-morrow; everything is arranged; and Kitty's bedroom is all upset, as well as those of the other children whom we left behind at Eastbourne, on purpose to keep the house clear. Kitty knows this; refers to it; handles it I may say as a weapon for getting her own way; and adds that her aunt cannot keep her longer, as if to clinch the matter."

"And there is no other visit you can arrange for her?"

"My dear, she would simply decline any other visit."

"Not if you told her in confidence that you did not wish her to go to the Rushingtons, and that she must make this other visit a pretext to refuse them."

"I could do that, yes, I could do that"—but the brightened expression on Lady Fanny's face faded as rapidly as it came—"if I could think of any house," she murmured. "But we know no one near Scarborough, and I fear if I were to speak of removing Kitty from that part, her father would not understand it, and would grumble at the expense. Journeys are expensive, you know. He would be sure to say she ought to stay where she is now that she is there, and come straight back when she leaves. And, oh, I had

forgotten she had her return ticket; of course that settles it. You don't understand these little difficulties, Olivia," her ladyship smiled and sighed, "but with our large family they are very real to us."

"Indeed I do understand them," said Olivia—although she did not in the least, but only wished to be kind—"and I should have liked so much to have asked Kitty to come to us. But Willie and I are going away ourselves. Willie insists upon it. He thinks I need a change——"

"So we all think; and I rejoice you are going to have it, my dear," and Olivia's hand was pressed. "You will be all the better for a good breath of sea air—but you are not thinking of going to Scarborough too?"—suddenly Lady Fanny withdrew the hand, as if a sudden thought had startled her.

"To Scarborough? Oh, dear, no; the last place in the world we should go to. A detestable place," said Olivia, vehemently. "What could have put Scarborough into your head, Lady Fanny?"

"I am sure I—don't know, Olivia."

"It is all this worry about Kitty, I suppose." After a minute's pause, Olivia resumed: "As *she* seems to find Scarborough so attractive, you fancy everyone else would. For myself I repeat"—and there was a little unnecessary emphasis on the repetition—"that there is *no* place I would not rather find myself in at this time, *none*."

"My dear, you look quite fierce about it!"

"It was such a cruel suggestion," said Olivia, laughing not quite naturally, "and I almost seemed to hear Willie giving in to it. If he had heard you just now, it would have been, 'And why not Scarborough? You see Lady Fanny approves it';—and all my life I have struggled to keep clear of those vulgar, odious,

cheap-tripper horrors. Pray, Lady Fanny, pray never mention Scarborough or any of its kith and kin to Willie."

"Where do you propose going then?" inquired Lady Fanny smiling, for no one could help smiling when Olivia gave her tongue the rein.

"We don't know where. Anywhere will do." Olivia subsided with as swift a transition to lassitude and indifference as before to energy. "It is Willie who wants to go, not I; I should rather stay at home,"—and she put up her hand to her cheek with a wearied air.

"The very reason why your husband is right in carrying you off," nodded Lady Fanny, with a maternal air. "You have been stagnating here all through the sultry days of August——"

"Indeed, they were not sultry, they were heavenly, but"—Olivia recollected herself—"I daresay they were not good for one, and I shall be better for a little bracing up. Now, to return to Kitty, I should have been so glad to help you if I could, Lady Fanny."

"I am sure you would, my dear." Then, "How soon does Oxford term begin?" abruptly demanded Lady Fanny, the bent of whose thoughts was thus proclaimed.

"Not for another fortnight; but Mr. Ambrose will never stay at Scarborough all that time," replied Olivia, not pretending she did not understand.

"Oh, I don't know, why not?" rejoined Lady Fanny, dejectedly. "Kitty gives no intimation of his departure."

"At Scarborough! I cannot think of him at Scarborough," mused Olivia, half to herself, her thoughts flying back to a reposeful figure reclining beneath the shade of a spreading elm. "Mr. Ambrose may have

been enticed thither by a—a need of change—and sea-breezes—and general waking up; he was often moody and depressed when here,—but he would never endure a place like Scarborough long. Depend upon it, he will be off long before his presence is required at Oxford. Then Kitty will——”

“Yes?”

“Fasten on some one else,” said Olivia. “Do forgive me, but it does seem so very likely that all this grand *furore* will have a very common-place ending.”

“And I am sure I hope it may,” said Lady Fanny, briskly.

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“What, you want to go to the Thatchers again?” exclaimed Willie Seaford, a few days after this. “Again? My word! I didn’t expect the pendulum to take such a swing back as all that. However—all right,” and he gave the order to the coachman and stepped inside the carriage beside his wife. Olivia had met him at the station, and now suggested calling together at The Grange on their way home.

“It’s all right,” repeated he, tucking the rug round his knees, “just what I like, that neighbourly popping in and out; only it’s a bit sudden, eh, Olivia? They’ll like it, I daresay. They’ll like it,” and he leaned back, and chuckled to himself.

“Here they come, the very people in all the world I least wanted to see!” ejaculated Colonel Thatcher, ten minutes later. “It’s the Seafords,” looking round. “The Seafords, d’ye hear? They are turning in at the gate now. Well, *you* can tell them, for I can’t,” and shuffling together some papers and catching up the hat and stick he had just laid down, he vanished. A man always does vanish when there is anything to be told.

With a sinking heart, Lady Fanny remained behind, and heard the door-bell ring.

And yet she could not have analysed the strange reluctance she felt to facing Olivia Seaford at the moment. It was there—no doubt it was there—but why? The news she had to give Olivia was not bad news, it might even have been termed after a fashion good news. It was at once a vindication, a justification, and an exoneration, and as if these “Actions” were not enough, it was also a revelation. Why mind disbursing herself of her revelation?

“I’m sure I don’t know,” argued poor Lady Fanny ruefully.

And she looked so grave as she came forward that Olivia, who had begun gaily, “We just looked in,” stopped dead, her lips parting.

“So kind, I am glad you did.” The elder lady made a nervous effort to be herself, and prolonged the greeting as though afraid of what would come next. “So very glad to see you,” repeated she, quite unaware of any fictitiousness in the fervour of her assertion. “For I—for we—we have—have—have——” Again a painful nervousness impeded her speech, and this time it was Willie Seaford’s hearty accents which interposed.

“Hullo, what’s up, Lady Fanny? Nothing wrong, I hope?” (“Can there have been an accident or anything?” reflected he, ready to fly for the doctor.) But her next words checked the idea.

“Oh, no; nothing wrong—nothing wrong certainly.” She faltered and resumed, “But we are a little upset, my husband and I—or perhaps I should say startled and—and we are not altogether sure that it—it is agreeably so.”

“Sorry for that,” Willie’s face beamed with goodwill, then shaded with sympathy. “Sorry for that,” he repeated, not thinking of anything better to add.

“We had never dreamed of anything of the kind,” proceeded his hostess, “and—and—and——”

“And it has agitated you, I fear?” This time it was Olivia who gently intervened. But a cold chill crept through the speaker’s veins as she spoke.

“It has. Yes, it has. But I had better speak out. You will wonder why I am so foolish, for I have only an ordinary event to—to announce. We heard from Kitty this morning—we also had a letter from Mr. Ambrose.”

Lady Fanny looked down.

There was a long pause.

“They ask our consent to an engagement between them.”

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SPARK TO THE GUNPOWDER.

AND now to see what brought about this startling announcement. When Philip Ambrose, a wretched object, was caught drifting about the London streets, captured and carried off by a little girl of eighteen, whom he regarded in the light of a plaything, nothing was further from his thoughts than to seek society, unless it were to enter into matrimony ; yet almost immediately he found himself embarked upon the one, and at the end of a fortnight prepared to face the other. How was this done ?

It is sad to have to say it in the case of a man of power, position, and influence, but the truth must be told ; self-esteem first mortified, then gratified and inflated, bore down all previous resolutions, and over-mastered all other feelings—till eventually Ambrose lost sight of these last altogether, and fancied he had achieved a triumph, when in reality he had committed a childish act of folly. He was not the first nor will he be the last to imagine a lover is reinstated in the opinion of a woman who has slighted him, by the fact that he has speedily replaced her by one who has not.

Not of course that Ambrose thought of himself as Olivia's lover ; he was, as we have seen, a cold-blooded, and would have called himself a virtuous man, and the sentiment wherewith he regarded Mrs. Seaford was perfectly lawful in his own eyes.

But he would have acknowledged it to be strong—strong and deep and all-pervading—a powerful factor in his daily life, and a crown of glory over hers,—and he felt that in return she ought to have poured forth the treasures of her soul at his feet.

So she had done—for a while; and then? Whenever he thought of those last hours in the beautiful garden, whenever he saw an evening sky that reminded him of the glow over the Surrey hills, whenever he smelt a certain fragrance—Kitty held up a bunch of mignonette to him once and he shuddered at it—he experienced an inner revulsion of feeling that almost made him hate Olivia.

He certainly felt that he would give much, in vulgar phrase, to pay her out. She should not have it all her own way; she should see that he was acceptable and prosperous elsewhere. Oh, spite is an old, old inhabitant of the human breast, and plays his part to-day as in the days before the flood—and when Philip Ambrose, the distinguished scholar, the eagerly-sought-after and made-much-of man of science walked about Scarborough with a cock-a-hoop air, turning in at this door and that, and showing himself wherever there was a gay assemblage, who would have guessed that a little black demon with an ugly name, often propelled his footsteps and prompted his actions?

Least of all would Miss Kitty Thatcher, who had brought her great man to the place, and consequently looked upon him in the light of her own property, perceive anything in Mr. Ambrose but a most amiable readiness to be and do all that his little band of followers desired. They mapped out his days for him, and occasionally his evenings also—though these last were assailed with more diffidence.

"I am afraid the Rushingtons want you to go to them again to-night," quoth Kitty once.

He had been so very often at the Rushingtons that she had said, and said decidedly, that she could not answer for her friend now—he was generally known as "Kitty's friend"—but would approach him; and this was how he was approached—with circumspection and a timid look.

"The Rushingtons! Oh!" said he, genially. "At what o'clock?" He seemed to take it for granted the invitation was to be accepted.

"You will go? Oh, how kind, how delightful of you," cried Kitty, all elation—"they *will* be pleased. Mrs. Rushington said she scarcely ventured to propose it, and that I must act as go-between. You see we are rather afraid of our lion," she wound up archly.

"He doesn't bite, you know," rejoined he, with his somewhat ponderous humour.

"He only growls a little sometimes," Kitty nodded back.

"Not at *you*. Come, you can't say he ever growled at *you*," and this is not the first time emphasis had been laid upon the "You".

Perhaps Ambrose had learnt the trick from Kitty herself. He had been present on more than one occasion when Olivia was the subject of some such adoring intonation, and had he consciously recalled it now, would certainly have employed some other means of marking out his lambkin from the fold,—but as it was, Kitty's little heart beat high as she listened.

And she did not tell Amy and Florence Rushington about it, which was a new departure for our little maid.

Hitherto she had proudly recounted the various trivialities which constituted her claim to be looked upon as Ambrose's sponsor in their coterie; she ac-

cepted the responsibility with a demure air which did not deceive, and was not meant to deceive any one; but of late a certain reserve had been manifested, and it was only to herself that she now whispered "*You*," and dwelt upon the look by which it was accentuated.

In fine, Kitty thought she was in love, and played the part very prettily. So prettily indeed, and with so much sweetness and womanliness, that Ambrose, who had begun by making use of her as an emollient wherewith to heal his hidden sore, began gradually to debate within himself whether things had not gone far enough, and whether he ought not now to slip away through the first loop-hole that offered?

He felt kindly and gratefully towards his little comforter; and if she would have been satisfied with such a return for her ministrations, would have been well content to stay where he was till due back at Oxford; but if his doing so were to jeopardise poor Kitty's happiness, he must really, must really put aside his own inclinations, since he was a celibate by preference, his bachelor lodgings being all the domestic hearth he cared for.

Thus he communed with himself one day—the next he took an opposite view of the matter. Some time or other he should marry, and there was no earthly reason why he should not marry at once. He had not, it is true, given the matter much previous thought, but this was doubtless due to the engrossing nature of his work, which left him little time for philandering among the Oxford ladies, and so far he had had no chance of becoming intimate with any others. Olivia Seaford had come to him as a—he dashed down the book in his hand, as he reflected on the revelation Olivia had been to him.

And he sat for a long time afterwards with his head

hanging on his breast. He was an argumentative man, and he set himself to reason out the matter.

Ultimately it shaped itself thus: he was ripe for women; he needed them; contact with them developed unknown qualities within himself which further required the stimulus of their smiles to mature, and in the fostering atmosphere of Mrs. Seaford's presence they had rushed ahead.

That was all—absolutely all. Any other agreeable and imaginative female possessed of a certain amount of brain—and beautiful of course—he paused. He could not deny Olivia's beauty, and it exasperated him to find that he could not get rid of it.

He could not forget it. It rose before him under various aspects, beheld at different times, in this light and that. Kitty stabbed him once with an innocent remark, "Does not that figure remind you of someone we know, Mr. Ambrose?" The figure was in front of them on the parade, silhouetted against the sky—Ambrose had seen the resemblance to Olivia some minutes before Kitty spoke. He made an excuse to quit the party immediately afterwards.

And now it seemed to him that his only chance of chasing the one image from his thoughts was to substitute another—yet at the first blush, and indeed for some little time after the first blush, the form of that other was not the form of Kitty Thatcher. Kitty was too unlike Olivia, could not stand beside her for a moment—a dear little girl, but he must have a woman of presence, a fine, handsome, noticeable woman. Should she have, in common parlance, "A handle to her name" so much the better—Mrs. Seaford made no pretensions towards being an aristocrat, he would like her to hear of him as being engaged to a "Lady" So-and-so.

The difficulty was that with all his certainty of being welcome in great houses, he did not actually know of one to begin upon, and his holiday time was drawing to a close. He pondered whether any of his Scarborough acquaintances might not prove stepping-stones, but rejected the idea. They were gentlefolks, but not of a superior rank to the Seafords, or the Thatchers. The Thatchers indeed—on a sudden he recalled that Kitty Thatcher was an earl's grand-daughter.

An earl's grand-daughter; then what if Kitty's parents looked higher for her than an Oxford don, albeit a man of renown in his zenith? Poor little Kitty, who a short while before had been not good enough, suddenly appeared in the light of too good for him. She was young, pretty, attractive, and Lady Fanny might have other views for her eldest daughter.

To cut the matter short, from one consideration to another, not the least of which was the very obvious impression he had already made on little Kitty herself, he arrived at the conclusion that the idea was at least worth entertaining, and that at any rate he had no need to fly from Scarborough. . . .

"I say, who's that?" Algy Rushington, who had arrived at his parents' temporary residence the evening before, was walking out with the family next day, being shown the place and having this and that pointed out to him, when he suddenly stopped short and uttered the above exclamation.

Who was that? The others laughed; it was Mr. Ambrose, of course; did he not know Mr. Ambrose? Of course he must know him.

"Ambrose here?" cried the boy, staring harder than before at the advancing figure. "What—what on earth is he here for?"

Upon which they all laughed again, it was really

too comical; what did Algy mean? Why should Mr. Ambrose not be there? He had been there ever so long.

"But—but he went to America," blurted out the newcomer, as though his eyes were deceiving him.

"America! Well, I suppose people do go to America and come back again," observed Amy Rushington, on whose arm her brother leant; "you funny boy, tell us what you mean, quick before he comes up—and my dear, you needn't pinch me"—for his nervous fingers were gripping her tighter than he was aware of.

"To turn up here!" muttered he, confusedly, "and he only went a fortnight ago! He must have just got there and back!—no, he can't, he couldn't, he can't have gone——"

"Mr. Ambrose? Mr. Ambrose?" cried Amy, glad of any pretext for accosting the lion of the hour in public, though in private Kitty Thatcher might have the prior claim—"here is a problem for you to solve. How did you get to America and back in a fortnight? Of course you just could and no more—but here's my brother——"

"How d'ye do?" said Ambrose, nodding to him with an air of easy superiority.

"Now won't you explain the mystification?" continued Miss Rushington, "for here are Algy's eyes starting out of his head."

"Because, sir, you wrote in your note that you were off in a hurry to America, and had no time to say good-bye," quoth Algy for himself; "so of course, I didn't expect to see you here." His look added "Nor did I wish it."

"I changed my plans," said Ambrose, coolly, "and came to Scarborough instead. No objection, I suppose?"

"Algy looks as if he thought you had some evil motive in doing it," laughed Florence Rushington, "some dark and sinister design——"

"Don't talk such beastly rot." Algy turned on her with a sharpness very unusual in a gentle boy, affectionately treated. "It's no business of mine what Mr. Ambrose does or where he goes. A fellow may be surprised——" and he muttered to himself.

"You have come straight from The Willow House, I suppose?" Ambrose affected a jaunty air, beneath which a keen observer might however have detected a certain alertness of observation. He knew perfectly that such was the case, but surely his movements had been followed at The Willow House, and if so, why this astonishment on the part of its recent inmate? "And you—you thought I had gone to America, ha! ha! ha! You are behind the times," he was proceeding jocularly, but Algy cut him short.

"Since you never told us, it wasn't likely we should know anything else," retorted he, bluntly. "You bolted—I mean you started for America, and we never heard anything more of you."

"Sure?" said Ambrose, eyeing him.

"Oh, come along"—the boy turned fretfully to his own party—"what are we all standing here for? Come on, Amy;" in her ear, and he urged her forward, and took no more notice of Ambrose and his incredulous "Sure?" than if it had never been spoken.

"Oh, Algy, how awfully rude you were," began she as soon as out of earshot—but the sisterly admonition was nipped in the bud.

"I only wish I had been ruder; I wish I knew how to be ruder; I just hate that supercilious ass. Come along, come along, let's get as far from him as ever we can. If I had known he was here," said the poor lame

boy, panting with the efforts he was making, "I'd never—that is I'd rather have gone anywhere else."

But when pressed to say why, Algy was too loyal to Olivia to give the real reason. Ambrose was a low cad, and a bumptious beast, and one who had no end of an opinion of himself—but beyond this somewhat vague description he would not go.

"Was he downright bad to you, yourself? He was not over civil to you just now?" persevered Amy, having tried in vain to get at the root of the matter otherwise. "But I must say, Algy, you attacked him first, and in a distinctly aggressive way. I couldn't think how you dared."

"Dared? Do you think I'm afraid of him? I shall say what I choose to him, beastly cad that he is."

"He must have been horrid to you, for you to speak like that," nodded she, reflectively. "Well, I never liked Mr. Ambrose, and I said only the other day I thought all this fuss about him rather over-done; and if he has been nasty to you, dear, even mother won't pander to him any more."

"I never said he had been nasty to me. How you do catch up a fellow. I said he was a conceited ass, and expected everybody to bow down before him. And I suppose that's what you are all doing here; so now he looks all on the top of the wave again, though when he left The Willow House——"

"Well?" said she, "Well?"

"He was like a sucked gooseberry skin," said Algy, with a retrospective gleam on his pale face. Amy laughed till the people looked at her as they passed.

"Don't make such a row," admonished he, but in more complacent accents. "He was, though. There wasn't a kick left in him. I'll tell you—at least I'll tell in a sort of way, for of course it isn't fair to peach about

what goes on in a house—but anyhow, there was something that stuck-up ass took offence at, something the Seafords—no, not the Seafords, for *he* wasn't there—but mind you, Amy, you're not to go telling this, promise you won't—well then, Mrs. Seaford was the one——”

“*That* even my mean understanding can grasp. Olivia is always the one——” Amy laughed meaningly.

“She's as nice as ever she can be. She's the nicest woman I have ever known. Much you know about her!” he choked with indignation, and loosened his hold so abruptly that he stumbled and nearly fell. “I say, don't you ever speak against Mrs. Seaford,” he panted, recovering.

“But tell me the end of her and Mr. Ambrose, and don't be a silly boy; of course I shan't if she was kind to you,” said Amy. “She is rather repellent to the world at large, you know; still, if she is good to my Algy—there, there,” patting his hand, “Olivia Seaford is sacred to me henceforth. So now——”

“She was good to both of us, to me and to him,—but he couldn't bear me—and was always trying to get her away from me,—and what I was going to say was there was something he chose to be angry about—and you never saw anything so beastly as his face when he is angry—and I just rubbed it in.”

“*You* did?”

“She sent me. It was a message she gave me—you needn't ask what, for I shan't tell—but that was the end of him at The Willow House.”

“He wasn't staying in the house, was he?” Truth to tell, Amy was not vitally interested, and his sensitive ear detected apathy in her accents.

“You needn't listen if you don't want,” muttered he, offended; “you asked me, or I shouldn't have

bothered you with it. *I* didn't want to talk about Ambrose, I dislike him too much."

"You had better not say so to Kitty Thatcher," suddenly Amy aroused herself; "there he comes, and Kitty with him. Algy dear, you will be careful before Kitty Thatcher, won't you?"

"Before Kitty Thatcher?" emitted he, blankly. He had rather liked Kitty on the day they met at *The Willow House*; in fact, if he had seen more of her he was prepared to like her very much—but he had been drawn off, and therefore only retained a vaguely pleasurable recollection, sufficient, however, to make his sister's words unpalatable.

"Mr. Ambrose is her friend," proceeded Amy, significantly; "it was the *Thatchers* who originally introduced him to us all, and Kitty——" But the pair in front drew near.

Instinctively Algy's hand went up to his cap, but the face beneath wore such an expression that Kitty's smile faded on her lips. She was prepared to stop—she had to pass on. And that very night, she and Ambrose were engaged.

With his faculty for drawing rapid deductions, the boy's truculent air appeared to Philip Ambrose so threatening, so likely to disconcert his half-conceived arrangements and make of himself a possible laughing-stock, that he foresaw he had not a moment to lose if he were to prevent an ugly story, made uglier in the mouth of a malevolent narrator, from being bruited abroad.

Up to the moment of Algy Rushington's appearance on the scene, he had felt so securely entrenched in his present position, that although aware the former was coming to Scarborough, he conceived his doing so a matter of no importance; either Algy would have for-

gotten, or would be overawed—but now it was a danger-signal he saw hoisted, and he could not afford to despise it. The letters received by Kitty's parents were despatched the next morning.

“I wish I could have seen more of how Olivia took it,” said Lady Fanny to her husband after the Seafords had gone, and he had come creeping back into the room to hear accounts. “I was particularly anxious to see the impression it made upon her—but her husband was so tiresome—well-meaning, of course, still one can always count upon *his* being kind and cordial,—and I did wish he would have let her speak.”

“So you couldn't tell what she thought? But I suppose she was civil enough?”

“Really I—yes, I suppose she was; but though I addressed myself to her naturally, he was so officious with his congratulations, and so determined to be heard, that I was literally forced to give him the most of my attention.”

“He seemed to think it a matter of congratulation? That's your City man all over; birth goes for nothing with him, it's all if a fellow has money, or brains, or is a big-wig of some sort; I suppose Willie Seaford considers we ought to jump at Ambrose, eh?”

“I suppose he does. Many people will. I shall have to give it out as if we were pleased, and yet——” Lady Fanny sighed uneasily.

“Well, well; there's no use going over the ground again; if we don't like it, we've got to lump it,” frowned he; “but about the Seafords? You say Willie was——?”

“Oh, exuberant. At any rate, talkative and troublesome. Evidently with no idea that it could be possible for there to be two opinions about the desirability of the match.”

"Humph!"—the colonel put out his lips, and considered. "You can't blame him for *that*. There was nothing in *that* to find fault with. If a girl's parents announce an engagement, the only decent way of taking it is to take it for granted it's satisfactory to them. Besides, poor Willie—he's not sharp—never sees beyond his nose—and I'd be bound you showed nothing?"

"I did my best, but I could not be *very*—that is to say, I should have thought they might have seen that we were not elated. I certainly should not wish Olivia, after all I have said to her on the subject already, to fancy we were not taken by surprise. If I could only have had her alone!"

And the sole comfort that Olivia had on that miserable homeward drive was that she had not been alone. She had got through her ordeal somehow, she could hardly tell how, but always at a bad moment there had been Willie's interested voice and his steady consumption of food and drink between her and observation; and at the worst, when Lady Fanny, resolutely turning from him, proposed an adjournment to herself, and even got as far as "Would you come with me, Olivia? I want to show you——" even at this crisis he had saved her and what was more, sacrificed himself for her.

"For I knew it wasn't the thing to talk about the horses," affirmed he afterwards; "and as a matter of fact they can stand any time; it's all rot about horses not standing—but I thought we had stayed long enough; I wanted an excuse to get home, and couldn't hit on anything else. I say, you didn't mind, did you? Because I knew it was vulgar and ostentatious and all that—and it was only because I was driven to it—and after all, Lady Fanny knows me, and if she thinks the worst of me I can't help it." And the theme lasted till they were well away from The Grange precincts.

Then it was: "A stupid affair this of Kitty's, I must say. I thought the little goose had more sense. A girl who has been nowhere and seen nobody to take the first man that asks her! A man twenty years older than herself. But I suppose I did well enough? I said the correct thing, eh?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, you said the correct thing many times over;" Olivia forced a faint, dreary smile. "You were admirable, Willie. I am sure Lady Fanny must have felt you were, and been grateful."

"Because, you see, it was pretty plain that she didn't like it and didn't know what to say about it. But the colonel and she can't very well object; there's nothing they can object to, poor souls. In a way it's quite a decent marriage, and yet it's rottenly unsuitable, and they think it so. I expect the idea never entered their heads,—but if you send a girl like Kitty off by herself with no one to tether her, she's bound to get into mischief."

"We mustn't call it mischief, you know, Willie."

"Not to them of course, nor to other people; but, between you and me, that silly little thing doesn't know what she is doing. She thinks it a monstrous fine thing to be made a fuss about and star it over other girls; she has been nobody till now, and had no decent dress allowance nor anything."

"She has always had a happy home." Olivia struggled to say something, it mattered not what, in a voice that should not betray her. If he would only keep to Kitty, she might be able to do this.

"A happy home, to be sure," acquiesced he, heartily; "as jolly a home as one could wish, with all those little brothers and sisters. I shall never forget how they ran me about that evening—hum—ha!—where are they all now, by the way? Didn't see or hear any of them,

and the house seemed queerly quiet ; generally one or other comes popping in, or you hear any number of them tumbling up and down stairs, for, though it's a well-enough built house, you do hear noises—what? Oh, they're all away? Thought they must be."

"There is painting being done in the upper rooms. Lady Fanny told me all about it the other day."

"Aye, I remember ; I saw a ladder, too, as we went by."

"That was why Kitty could not come home this week."

"And if she had come, this engagement might never—Lord, the colonel won't care to pay that painter's bill," observed Willie, grimly. "He'd better have kept the door open for Kitty. . . . Well," after a pause, "it's their look-out, if it comes off, which I have my doubts about. I know what I should do in his place."

"What would you do?" They were near home, and Olivia could breathe more freely, though her face was still turned aside.

"Make them wait a year ; say she's too young, and that sort of thing. Then ten to one she cries off—especially if some smart young fellow comes along in the meantime. But if the old folks are weak enough to give in—ah, here we are!" as they drew up, and the next minute he was out and handing her out ; "run in and get warm, dear, it is almost too cold for the open carriage to-night," and he gently pushed her through the doorway into the firelit, curtained hall,—but himself remained behind and did not follow till she had passed upstairs out of sight.

Alone at last—and would she were not!—that was Olivia's first conscious thought. For one brief moment she almost thought she would fly back to her husband's

presence which necessitated self-control and a resolute grip upon the emotions, which once loosed, threatened to prove overwhelming ; but no, she would not be so weak, she would have it out with herself and master herself.

At present she felt numb—she must wake the pain, and subdue it.

What was this horrible thing that had befallen her ? She strove to be collected, and give herself to realising its nature and extent. Do not mistake, it was not the loss, the final and irrevocable loss of Ambrose which made the future so ghastly in Olivia's eyes ; it was something infinitely worse, it was the fear, the trembling, shuddering fear, lest the dead past, which she had hoped to bury out of sight and for ever, should start to life again. It was herself she could not bear to look upon in days to come.

Ambrose as Kitty's husband ! And hitherto, in conjunction with Kitty, he had simply ignored Kitty, had treated her as a child to be played with, or told to run away, according to his mood. What about that laughing whisper " Shall we send her home ? " on the occasion of his first call at The Willow House ? Had he forgotten it ? Would he ever bethink himself of it now ? Yet he had deliberately chosen this little girl, whose sole attraction in his eyes must be her youth and outward appearance, as his partner for life ! It was incredible, inexplicable.

And again she had depicted Philip Ambrose in her mind's eye, as flying from temptation and resolved to place himself beyond its reach. That picture must be blotted out ; it could never really have existed, (she winced, but it was only a passing spasm),—what made her shiver was the prospect in front, not behind. Her whole future life was to be overshadowed by the ignominy of this man's act.

For there would be no getting rid of it, no banishing it from memory, no escape from it as an ever-recurring torment liable at any moment to confront her in her daily path; and what if she—if she grew to think of it by some other name? What if once more she fell beneath the spell? No, no;—she gasped, she panted, she almost cried aloud in her passionate denial—and yet—and yet——!

Regaining self-command, Olivia strove to penetrate the veil of the future through the medium of sober probability. It was not likely that she would ever be called upon to test her own strength with Ambrose as a married man, since he would neither have the desire to renew nor the opportunity for renewing his former footing at The Willow House.

As Colonel Thatcher's son-in-law he would develop new attributes, even supposing these were not called forth by Kitty as his wife. His new position would entail new responsibilities and limitations. He would alter—certainly he would alter,—and whether he improved or not, he would gradually cast the husk of his former self, till some day she might even have to wonder what that self had been like? She cheered a little beneath the thought.

But all too soon returned the vision of the intervening present. There would be the first meeting; there would be Kitty—no longer her own Kitty—radiant with bliss and swallowed up by importance; she could see Kitty's eyes following her lover about—and he complacent, benignant, perhaps a little shy before herself, yet not unwilling to parade his new-born supremacy, not indisposed to clink his festal chains, and laugh at the unregenerate days when he had scoffed at the same.

How strange and unnatural it would be to see him thus! How horrible for the spectator of the scene!

And it must be naturally followed by others of a like nature; social amenities must be preserved, social exactions must be paid; there must be ceremonious entertaining and wedding preparations. The wedding itself? She paused—could she not by some means or other contrive to absent herself on the wedding day? . . . But, after all, it was not this nor any other special occasion she dreaded; they were nothing in comparison with those little trivial occurrences she foresaw haunting her daily life, robbing it of all its peaceful security, fretting, distressing, unhinging, yet perhaps, oh, shame! exciting and alluring.

For, of course, Ambrose would come and go, having connected himself with the neighbourhood; would, indeed, be more frequently there, in that he had no ties elsewhere.

Kitty's home would be his home. He would adopt her people and her friends as his. During Oxford vacations—six months of the year—he would be free to go where he chose; and it was natural to suppose that he might often choose a quiet residence in a part of the country for which he had always expressed a predilection, when not claimed elsewhere.

Then what if he fixed on a dwelling in the neighbourhood, even in the vicinity of The Willow House? What if he began to walk up to the garden-door in the old way—she rose and the colour blazed into her face—“*Never, sir,*” she said. Her frame shook, her knees tottered beneath—then slowly she sank upon them—“Oh, God help me—” she prayed.

“I think we might be off on Monday. Is there anything to prevent our going on Monday?”

Willie Seaford had followed his wife into the drawing-room, carrying on a discussion begun at the dinner-table.

"I can get away then, if you can ; and we have put it off several times already ; let us fix on a day and stick to it."

"Yes, Willie, very well, if you like." Olivia took up a piece of rather desolate-looking needlework wherewith she had provided herself, and unrolled it. It had not seen the light for many a day, but to thread needles and sort silks might be a refuge now. "Where shall we go?" proceeded she, laying the skeins across her knee.

"Paris," said he, succinctly.

"Paris?" She looked up in spite of herself. "Paris, Willie?"

"Paris, my dear," he nodded a cheerful reiteration. "No place like Paris under certain circumstances. Circumstances in the present instance are that it is late in the year ; dull, and cold for the country ; that India and Japan and Rome and the Italian lakes all mean long journeys, and you don't like long journeys——"

"But, Willie—India—Japan?" she looked her amazement. She was thoroughly arrested, the canvas slipped off her lap.

"Oh, I mean it," he nodded again ; "don't you make any mistake about that. I intend to take the whip-hand of you on this occasion, my dear, and have only been debating with myself how far I could risk taking you ? If you didn't look such a frail little thing——"

"Little?"

"You are 'Little' in one way if not in another—and a man always thinks of a woman he's fond of as 'Little'. I heard old Thatcher calling Lady Fanny 'Little' one day—I declare I did, and she'd make three of you or Kitty either."

"How came you to hear it?"

"Oh, I was at the gate just behind them. He brought her letters, and had been hunting about for her : 'Here,

take these, you little tiresome——' he began, and then he saw me and stopped."

Olivia smiled a somewhat shadowy smile, and hesitated. "Did you say I looked frail, Willie?"

"And I am going to say it again. You're run down, nervous, and out-of-sorts generally. Then this stupid business of Kitty Thatcher's has upset you; I know I felt as if I should like to knock all their heads together—so off we go, and to prove to you that I'm in earnest," he fumbled in his pocket, "here are our rooms engaged at the 'Bristol'"; and he threw her a letter.

"You wrote for rooms without saying anything to me?" But Olivia did not look ill-pleased, and indeed had a sensation of being taken possession of by a pair of strong, sheltering arms which carried comfort and support. "It takes my breath away, Willie"—and she read the epistle from beginning to end, as though it were something strange and novel. In reality she was not taking in a word, she was thinking, thinking fast and breathlessly. Did Willie guess—did he suspect—did he *know*?

Once or twice during her solitary hour upstairs it had passed across her mind to ask this question—indeed she had vaguely wondered at other times, times when it seemed as though he were unusually alert and tactful. Never once had he done the wrong thing at a crucial moment; never once had he struck, as it were, a false note; while, on the other hand, he had as it seemed accidentally and involuntarily shielded her when she was powerless to protect herself.

But it was not till the great disclosure fell from Lady Fanny's lips that Olivia had seriously believed—and even now she knew not what to believe. Certainly had her husband pierced her very soul he could not have lent her greater aid than he did at that exquisitely

awful moment. He had, in what seemed the blundering fashion of a blundering fool, thrust himself forward when by rights *she* should have taken the lead; and when, but for what even the amiable hostess termed his officiousness, her bewilderment, her consternation and agitation must have betrayed her.

Again, on the way home he had not once mentioned the name of Philip Ambrose. It was "Kitty's affair," and it was as Kitty's friend that he condemned it.

During dinner he had openly and easily referred to the same as to a piece of interesting news—observing to her, during an interval when the servants had left the room, that as it would of course be in circulation everywhere directly, they might as well let their household hear of it from themselves. "There's no need for them to know what we think," added he, with a sagacious pursing of the mouth; "we don't want our opinions to get round to the Thatchers by the underground passage." And again she applauded his prudence, and played up to it, as the saying is.

It was little masterly touches such as this last which allayed Olivia's suspicions as fast as they rose. For surely Willie, however clever and resourceful he might show himself in public, would not, could not be such a consummate actor in private—if, indeed, he could act at all? With her he never had acted and she had never dreamed he could act—and yet here he was once more baffling conjecture, and phlegmatic beneath scrutiny. She knew not what to think.

And presently she discovered that Willie was speaking, and had been speaking for some time.

"It really is rather too bad here now, isn't it?" He saw that her attention was roused at last, and waited for a reply.

"I—I'm afraid I was not listening, Willie." She

looked apologetic and he nodded good-humouredly, "Taken up with the Paris idea. It is a ripping one, isn't it? But what I was saying was"—(oh, what was he saying? What had he been saying? Her eyes dilated, and sought his searching)—"that we have really stood it long enough, the wretched kind of fish that woman has been giving us for dinner ever since we knocked off salmon. You spoke to her, I know; and she started all right for a day or two, but it's been nothing but trash for a long time past. I may eat turbot and soles—and—oh, there are lots of decent kinds; Jack Malcolm made out quite a long list—but she never sends up any but those eternal whittings, or something equally poor and tasteless."

"My poor Willie! Why did you not speak before?"

"Seemed greedy, and that," said he. "And as *you* didn't notice it——"

"But I might have noticed, I ought to have noticed; I am so sorry, Willie."

"It's no matter, you know. Daresay it has done me good, for I'm too fond of fish, that's a fact; but then Jack Malcolm said fish of the right kind was no harm, and if I wanted to be extra particular it could be broiled, but I thought I wouldn't bother to have it broiled," he added, meditatively.

"I will take care you get what you like in future, Willie. I will speak about it to-morrow."

"Well, no, that's just what I shouldn't do if I were you, Olivia; as we are going away so soon, I should wait till we come back, and then you could say—let me see—that we had taken to French cookery, eh?"

"No, indeed," she laughed a little; "and I don't need to think of what I shall say. It is abominable that you should not have any kind of food you like on your table, paying the wages you do, and never stinting

Mitcham in any way. It is my fault," cried Olivia energetically, and was ready to pursue the subject as long as he chose. (He congratulated himself, "That fetched her," thought he.)

And when Paris came again upon the *tapis*, Olivia entered into the discussion of the projected trip with something resembling animation. She had only been abroad once in her life, and that under the guardianship of parents who travelled according to old school notions, engaging private carriages and private rooms wherever they went, and surrounding themselves with a solemn environment which effectually prevented every breath of another mental atmosphere from reaching, they would have said from contaminating their child.

Such an experience was an oppression; she had never desired to repeat it; had she been asked now, she would probably have declined to cross the Channel; she would have suggested some quiet spot,—Willie took counsel with nobody and wrote to the "Hotel Bristol".

And the event justified his cunning. Olivia was a poor traveller, and even with everything made easy for her, could hardly believe that she was safely reposing on the sofa in her own bedroom, with Laurette unpacking, and all her little comforts appearing like magic on every side, at six o'clock on the evening of the day she started.

She had been fearful and relieved by turns; every change had been a bugbear, and when accomplished a feat.

Willie had been wonderful; Laurette invaluable: she was meek and grateful to both; she was not at all tired and would go down to dinner; she watched Laurette laying out her dinner dress with interest.

"Madam will see that I have filled up the neck and sleeves;" the dress was brought for inspection—"there

was so little time, but I knew what Madam would require, and this will be *convenable* for to-night," quoth Laurette, proudly. "*Enfin*, when Madam desires a change, another will be ready. In Paris I look about me, I see what is *à la mode*, and if *nécessaire* I run up a whole new bodice, light, elegant, all lace, if Madam so desires."

"I suppose one always appears in a high dress at the *table d'hôte*, Laurette? I know nothing of hotel life," owned Olivia, smiling a little at herself for her ignorance.

"*Mais, oui; toujours*, always." Laurette shook her head decidedly. "But Madam will look very well, very pretty in the high frock"—and a glance which her mistress caught, betrayed what was passing within.

"Better than in a low-necked one, I daresay, at present," rejoined she, calmly, "I am too thin; well, never mind,"—and she rose to array herself.

"It's a wonder we got the rooms," said Willie, coming in, "the hotel is crammed, and I have seen a number of nice-looking people about. If you're ready, we'll go down, dear. I have inspected our table; it is at the far end, so if we are early we can watch the rest come in."

By-and-by it was, "I say, this is amusing, isn't it? Look at that party over there; not English, whatever they are—queer-looking fellows, the men; I wish we were near enough to hear what language they are talking"—then, "Good Heavens, what a gigantic female, and trotting out a little bit of a husband—we'll suppose he's a husband for the sake of argument—though you know, Olivia," profoundly, "you know one does meet shady characters abroad. I shouldn't advise you to look over yonder, for instance"—and so on, and so on.

Despite herself Olivia found the dinner entertaining.

And she went early to bed and had a good night's rest. Indeed, she slept so profoundly that when the morning sun shone into her eyes—for she had begged to have the window left open—she could not think for a full minute where she was. She felt fresher and better than she had done for weeks.

A brilliant October day had dawned, and all the gay sounds of the gayest city in the world broke upon her ears. "Paris is the place, isn't it?" said Willie, kissing her.

"Now for the shops and the streets," announced he, after breakfast; "we'll just stroll and stare this morning; and have a drive in the Bois in the afternoon. We won't do sight-seeing till we feel inclined for it; so on with your hat, and let's get out into the sun, Olivia."

He had been out himself already and brought her a bunch of violets. "We must get some flowers for the sitting-room," he said, as they turned into the Avenue de l'Opera—"and I have been inquiring about opera tickets; but I waited to see whether you would go to-night, or wait a bit?"

"I think I will wait, Willie." She was hardly ready for opera tickets yet.

But she walked with him, and drove with him, and sat with him under the trees, admiring their blaze of autumn foliage against the deep blue sky overhead, and the varied kaleidoscope of the ever-moving throngs below,—noting this and that which he pointed out to her,—a gentle, docile companion whose only fault, if fault it could be deemed, lay in a certain dreamy incapacity to originate anything for herself, or devise any methods of making the pleasant hours pass more pleasantly. It was all what Willie wished and what Willie settled for which she had a smile and ready acquiescence.

Sometimes they took boat, and the gliding up and

down the beautiful river seemed to suit Olivia better than anything. Willie would be anxious as the little steamer drew near their point of embarkation, lest a comfortable seat might not be available, but Olivia patiently let others pass in before her, and thought she did very well wherever she found room.

She admired the shadows of the trees upon the glassy waters, in particular a poplar promontory near St. Cloud, whose tall spires were reflected down to the minutest leaf. "How beautiful!—how beautiful!" she sighed repeatedly, and begged to return that way, confident that it would not be too late or cold, as her husband feared. "The days are so warm," she urged, "that it will not matter even if the sun is down."

Fontainebleau delighted her; here was a garden after her own heart; a garden on the edge of a forest, with endless vistas down which imagination might rove from point to point. Even its artificiality, Olivia averred, did not seem out of place; it was a frankly artificial life that was wont to be led there. The statues and fountains? She would not have had them in an English parterre, but here they seemed only in keeping; no, she did not mind them at all.

And how wonderful, how wonderful were those brilliant, gorgeous tints upon the woods; never had she seen or imagined such colouring, such splendour.

"Why, aye, we are lucky in having such a fine autumn," observed Willie to this; "a fellow told me to-day that he could only compare the trees at Fontainebleau to those in Maine—he was an American, and, of course, Maine is their show county. He said the red maple in Maine was a sight for the gods."

"But have they a sky for the gods, too?" cried Olivia. "Even that"—pointing to the glowing landscape—"would not be what it is beneath any other sky."

She was so enthusiastic that day that his spirits rose to a high pitch, and then—he never knew exactly how it transpired, but perhaps the truth was there had been this danger all along—a reaction set in.

Olivia, unaccustomed to the exertion and fatigue of so much going about under novel conditions, uprooted perchance too abruptly from the familiar lines of her home life, was physically overstrained, and all she had striven to hide from herself hitherto, became apparent.

She had simply been under a narcotic, she was not really cured of her heart-wound.

“Oh, don’t you care to go out again?” Willie paused in giving an order for the carriage they had just stepped out of, to return at a later hour. “Oh, very well; shall we do some churches? Or——”

“Not churches to-day, please, Willie.”

“All right, I’m no great hand at churches myself. What about the Louvre?—but we’ve been to that beastly Louvre——”

“Oh, yes, we have done our duty by the Louvre, Willie.”

He thought a minute. “Would it be a good day for——”

“Not a good day for anything, if you ask me, dear,”—she could not keep a faint impatience from entering into her tone. “I don’t feel inclined for—for going out again. Do *you* go,”—and he was dismissed hurriedly.

Next day it was a repetition of the same; she was listless, her footsteps dragged, she was for ever wanting to sit down if walking—if driving, she could think of nowhere to drive to.

He tried to get her to shop. “You know it’s a chance, Olivia, and I’ve seen some of the finest furs to-day I ever set eyes on. What? You don’t need furs? Oh, nonsense, what woman doesn’t need a sable coat if

her husband offers it her? Come along, I've seen the very coat for you," and when he saw her in it his eye glistened.

"But, dear Willie, this is Russian sable, only fit for a princess."

"Is it? Glad to hear it. It is good enough for you, then."

"But, Willie——" and she whispered again in his ear.

"All right—all right," said he, aloud. "Never you mind that. That's my affair," and he wrote a cheque in the corner, and gave the home address.

Then he turned to her again. "You needn't be bothered with it here, but you'll be glad enough to find it hanging in your wardrobe when the first cold days begin. Money is never thrown away on furs," added he, cheerfully; "and if you take my advice," with an afterthought, "you'll have a muff to match."

She assured him, however, that she already had a muff to match and a sable-trimmed hat to boot—and as he could think of nothing else at the moment, he was obliged to follow her out. But he looked like a man who had received rather than spent a thousand pounds, for Olivia, divining his feelings, set herself resolutely to gratify them, affecting the utmost pride in her new possession, and vowing she would be the envy of every friend she possessed. "Lady Fanny will think me frightfully extravagant, Willie."

"Aye, won't she?" quoth he, delighted.

And then this too passed, and the old lassitude, the old apathy crept back; he even thought her paler and thinner than before.

"Olivia, it's no use, you must see a doctor."

Olivia, startled by the abrupt, authoritative tone, dropped the book in her hand, and the hand dropped after it.

"There, you see," persevered Willie, picking up the book, "that shows; that shows your nerves are all gone to fiddlestrings. You jumped just now as if a cannon-ball had gone off at your ear."

"You—you startled me so. Any one would have jumped."

"See a doctor you must and shall."

And to humour him she did, with what result may be guessed.

"I'm better satisfied now," quoth Willie, however, "for it's everything to know there's nothing serious. I had it out with him, and insisted on a straight answer. If it hadn't been a satisfactory one, I should have kept it to myself. But it was, absolutely. So now you'll obey orders and take your medicines regularly; and if there's anything else——"

"Willie!"

He listened.

It was dusk, and the lights were not lit within. He was sitting by the open window, and Olivia, who had been out of the room, and glided noiselessly in again, now leaned over the back of his chair. As she did not proceed, he turned and looked up at her, but she shrank a little, and he could not see her face.

"What is it, dear?" he said, softly.

"I—I want to say something, Willie."

"Yes, dear!"

"It was useless to send for that doctor, he could do me no good. He knew that, and only prescribed a tonic because he had to do something. Of course I'll take it; I have sent Laurette out to have it made up now—and perhaps it will help me to—to——" she faltered and stopped.

"To pick up your strength. Just what he said," nodded Willie, hopefully; "and then, when you feel

stronger, you'll be more able to——" then he, too, paused, as though on dangerous ground.

"But, Willie, I want to say something now—at once—while I can. It is no doctor that I need——" he could feel her trembling so much that he longed, oh, how he longed to take her in his arms and say, "Hush; be still; be at peace," but led by a wondrous instinct he forbore; it was not this she needed.

"Are you listening, Willie?" the voice in his ear went on.

Then he put his hand upon her hand, but he did not look round.

"I am not very happy," said Olivia brokenly; "I am going through—a trouble. . . . It is *that* which makes me hot and wakeful at night, and baffles all your kind, kind efforts by day. . . . Willie—oh, you can't think how I long to tell you all—and I am going to do it—I am—I am—only not just yet. . . . Very soon, Willie; quite soon—only give me a little time. You are so dear, so good, and I—I love you as I have never done before—can you bear to wait a little longer? . . . You are always so patient with me, shall I not wear out your patience? . . . I had not meant to say so much, because I have no right to vex you and yet keep from you——" she could articulate no more.

"You have the right because I give it you, my darling. I would not force one syllable from your dear lips; it is enough that you have told me you are suffering, and that I need no longer pretend, as I have pretended, not to see it."

"You have—seen it—Willie?"

"And dared not speak. But now," he bent over her, for she had slipped round, and was on the ground beside him, clinging to the arm of his chair.

"Now," he whispered, "shall I?"

"Oh, no—*no*," a cry escaped. "Oh, Willie, I can't—I can't. Indeed, indeed, Willie"—and she laid her head upon his knee and wept, half-uttered words choking in her throat.

"Olivia?" He had thought awhile, deliberating within himself whether despite her entreaties it would not be well for him to probe the hidden wound to its depth, but her convulsive sobbing shook her poor attenuated frame so cruelly that he felt it must be arrested at any cost.

Accordingly, "Olivia?" he murmured, and the arm which encircled her pressed itself more closely. "It's all right, you know. You hear, darling? It's—it's all right." With what exquisite tenderness the familiar commonplace was fraught, with what balm it fell upon her ear!

"I have known there was something wrong for a long time past, almost ever since I came home from Scotland," proceeded Willie, stroking her head softly; "and don't be angry with me, dearest, I have guessed what it was." He drew a breath, and continued in the same gentle undertone: "I knew you'd tell me about it some time; and I could wait—and I *can* wait. What?" he felt her wet cheek upon his hand, and knew her lips were moving—"never mind, let *me* speak; my darling need not say a word, for she knows, she knows I understand. I have understood all along. Things hadn't worked out exactly right, and she was feeling——"

"—Oh, so miserable, so miserable, Willie."

"My poor darling; and I couldn't help her, though I did my best. But it's past," he stopped and resumed emphatically, "*it's past*. And she doesn't fear me now, she only trusts me——"

"And loves you—loves you."

"God knows I'm a poor sort of chap for a woman like you to love——"

“No—no.”

“But in future we’ll be more to each other—yes, even you will be more to me, though I used to think that couldn’t be, but I know better now—than you have ever been. Only you must be brave and strong—oh, don’t cry so, dear one, it weakens you and you are so weak already; just come here”—he lifted her and laid her on his breast—“see, I am content,” he whispered, “and some day you will be content too.” And even as he spoke a strange deep peace filled the bosom which heaved upon his own.

CHAPTER XIV.

ONE NOVEMBER AFTERNOON.

THE Seafords were still away when Kitty Thatcher returned home towards the middle of October, by which fact when announced she felt aggrieved and defrauded.

Olivia was indeed no longer all in all with her, but Olivia's approbation and support at this crisis had been reckoned upon and was of importance,—the truth being that the young lady's engagement had not been received with any particular show of enthusiasm by her relations and friends outside the little *côterie* at Scarborough.

There she had been queen of the hour, and enjoyed to the full the sweets of consequence and of supposed envy,—but the outer world as typified by the members of her own family and its various branches, had been annoyingly cool.

There had been a great deal of surprise but not exactly agreeable surprise manifested. Kindly as her parents had written, she had missed something from their letters; and in reply to her eager inquiries as to how this one and that one had taken the news, Lady Fanny had observed a discreet silence, only remarking that the inquirer should hear all there was to hear on her return home.

This was hardly what Kitty had expected, and perhaps it hastened the day of reunion; nor when her first conference was over, was the little lady better satisfied.

"I can't see what Uncle Robert can object to," argued she, indignantly; "did you tell him—what *did* you tell him, mother? What did you say? Doesn't he know who Philip is? I should have thought he would not have considered *me* good enough for *him*. That was how they felt at Scarborough."

"Very likely, my dear. Relations look on these matters in a different light."

"But what did he say?" persisted Kitty, obstinately.

"Your uncle seemed rather surprised that your father and I should have given our consent."

"Mother!"

"You asked me to tell you the truth, Kitty."

"But how? Why? How extraordinary! How ridiculous!" Kitty's cheeks burned. "What reason does Uncle Robert give for being so absurd? Doesn't he know who Philip is?" she reiterated.

"That is just what your uncle says he does *not* know, and what we were not able to tell him," said Lady Fanny, quietly. "Every one knows *what* Mr. Ambrose is, but not *who*. Perhaps you can tell us this last? Perhaps he has enlightened you, though he has not seen fit to—oh, I did not mean to hurt you, dear child, but really we are quite in the dark as to Philip's (the word came out with reluctant hesitation) antecedents; and it is natural that we, and your other relations, should wish to know something of them. Has he ever spoken to you?" she paused.

He had not, and Kitty had never asked him. Why should she, she demanded defiantly? He was enough in himself; it was himself she was marrying, not his sisters and his cousins and his aunts—and she laughed scoffingly as she quoted the catchword.

"Quite so. And it is because we are satisfied that

there is nothing to which we can take reasonable objection in Philip Ambrose himself——” But Lady Fanny got no farther.

“Nothing you can take objection to!”

Kitty’s eyes widened.

“Mother, aren’t you pleased and proud and delighted?”

“Not altogether,” said Lady Fanny, dryly.

Kitty tried her father.

“Wasn’t it wonderful that a man like Philip should think of poor little me—a man that *any one* might be glad to marry?” began she, getting him alone. “Mother doesn’t seem to see it—but you do, don’t you, father? I knew how you felt when he came here in the summer; you said we were honoured by his caring to come. You little thought then he would care for more than that.”

“Aye, indeed. I little thought it,”—but the colonel’s tone was not exultant.

“I was afraid to look at him or to speak to him at first,” continued Kitty, with pleased reminiscence; “and as for being alone with him—although I got over *that* after we walked that day to The Willow House, and I found he felt as I did about Olivia. We always had something to talk about after that.”

“Humph!” The colonel looked at her, and muttered beneath his breath.

“*You* thought he admired Olivia,” ran on Kitty, bantering him; “you were quite sniffy about it the night the Seafords dined here, and trotted off next day to catch Philip flirting, as you thought, in Olivia’s garden. I knew what took you there, though you thought I didn’t. And I laughed to myself; because *then* I never dreamed that Philip could flirt with anybody; I thought of him as far too grand and—and altogether. But I told him one day at Scarborough

that if I had known him then as I do now, I shouldn't have been so keen to establish him at Olivia's back-door."

"You did? You said that? That was rather a strange thing to say, child." ("And a damned stupid thing too," muttered the colonel to himself.)

Kitty, however, threw up her chin. "Oh, Philip doesn't mind; he lets me say whatever I like to him. Only once he looked a little put out——" she paused, reflecting.

"About Olivia?"

"I don't think he cares so very much for Olivia now; not so very much;" replied Kitty, confidentially. "You know, father, *you* don't, and a great many people don't. *I* am as fond of her as ever, but I can see what Philip means. She is—she does—she does think a good deal of herself."

"Ha-ha-ha! You have found that out at last, have you? I wondered how long it would take. So the divinity has had to come off her pedestal at last?" the colonel chuckled provokingly. "Well now," proceeded he, composing himself, "now *I* am just beginning to recognise Olivia Seaford's merits. I don't think she is anything like as stuck-up and unneighbourly as I used to find her. Or else it is she who has improved. She has been over here a good deal while you were away, and both your mother and I have noticed the change. Her whole air and manner, even her face is different. She always had a sweet smile, a wonderfully sweet smile—when she let you see it,—but hang it all, she hardly ever did let you; whereas now—you ask your mother, she'll tell you what we have both been agreed upon of late about Olivia."

"Mother always liked her. It was you——"

"Well, well," said the colonel, testily. He did not care to be reminded of what he was willing to forget.

After a pause he recommenced: "So your swain picks holes in other quarters? Is that by way of extolling your attractions, Miss Kit? Certainly no two good-looking girls could be less like each other than you and Olivia Seaford."

"Do you call Olivia a girl?" Kitty's eyebrows went up. She and the Rushingtons and the various other damsels of their set whose ages ranged from seventeen to twenty were "Girls"—they would not recognise by this term a married woman several years senior to all. "A girl?" repeated she, incredulously.

Colonel Thatcher threw her a contemptuous glance.

"I call her a girl, I call you a child—and rather a silly child. Six months ago you were in the schoolroom, without a thought beyond French verbs and German exercises. Hold hard: I daresay—I daresay," his voice rising above hers—"anyway you weren't *supposed* to have a thought, and you must certainly have had no knowledge. You go away for a few visits, you meet a few people, you pick up a sweetheart—and back you come ready to teach us all our P's and Q's. Olivia Seaford is a girl—a young, beautiful girl—not by any means a perfect girl, but there's fine material to work upon—(as you had once the wit to see, my lass, however you may turn round now)—and, by George, even as she is now, I'll wager there's not one of those little twopenny-halfpenny things you have been running about with lately, who could hold a candle to her. What she'll be by-and-by—but I'm talking like your mother; and after all, I have no business to talk, for I always did Mrs. Seaford injustice, and I'm not above owning it."

"Anyhow Philip likes me best," retorted Kitty, a shade disconcerted; "and it's rather mean of you, father, to flare up and accuse *me* of turning round just because *you* have! I have not turned one bit. All I said

was that Philip was not so taken with Olivia as we thought he was. We thought he admired her so awfully—whereas now he seems to have forgotten all about her. He hardly ever mentions her name.”

“You said he—I forget what, but I gathered he ran her down.”

This, however, Kitty would not allow. Already she repented of the slip which had created an unfavourable impression of her fiancé, whom it was her present object to exalt by every means in her power—and she now made a determined effort to eat her words.

Ambrose had never belittled Olivia; she was sure he still thought Olivia a remarkable woman; it was only that he—that she—that they had one and all exaggerated the estimation in which he held her,—and having disposed of the theme, she returned to Philip himself.

But she did not get much satisfaction out of her father on this head. The colonel was cautious and he was kind; he dared say Kitty knew her own mind, and not being a bookish man himself, he was probably mistaken in thinking bookish men were not the natural husbands for chits of eighteen who made no pretensions to being clever.

He hoped she would read up a bit, and not show herself an ignorant little puss among the learned folks at Oxford. There were big dogs there, she must remember,—and he pinched her ear and patted her shoulder, and presently strolled away, convinced that he had delivered himself of a proper paternal admonition which might or might not bear fruit, but which had at any rate saved him from showing his dislike of a marriage which it was obvious he was powerless to prevent.

Clever or not, Kitty was, however, quick enough to perceive how the land lay, and her desire for Olivia's countenance and Olivia's sympathy grew in consequence.

Olivia would be on her side, whoever was not. Olivia, who would not stir a foot to meet a personage of rank or worldly importance—who had been frankly bored by divers of Lady Fanny's august kindred and notably so by her brother Robert, the future earl, of whom and of whose opinion they all stood in awe—Olivia had hastened to sit at the feet of Philip Ambrose. Why then was she not here now to lift up her voice and proclaim her partisanship? Why was The Willow House empty just when it was most needed as a bulwark?

“Does Olivia know I am back?” queried Kitty one day.

Yes, Lady Fanny believed Olivia did. She knew at any rate that Kitty was expected.

“Well, I think she needn't stay away then; it isn't very kind of her;” and the little girl spoke complainingly. “I thought she would have taken more interest in Philip and me.”

“And shortened her holiday on your account? Not very reasonable that, my little Kitty. Philip and you may very well be content with each other; you can't expect to influence the movements of your friends.”

“Olivia knows how dull it is here in November. If Philip could come oftener I shouldn't mind so much; but he says he can't, and there isn't a soul to talk to”—then suddenly Kitty caught back her words and threw her arms about her mother. “You know I didn't mean that, darling; and if you would like Philip a little better, and care a little more to talk with me about him, I shouldn't want Olivia. But you see, she—she just feels as I do.”

“Are you quite sure she does?” It seemed to Lady Fanny that the time had come to give a hint. “Has she written as if she did?”

Now the truth was that Olivia's letter—there had only been one—held to have been private, might have been read aloud at the street corners; indeed, it was because it was so very moderate, so very well expressed, so exactly what propriety and affection dictated, that Kitty, who had expected a very riot of rapture (and three sheets at least), stowed it away in her pocket at the first, and did not produce it for home inspection thereafter.

"I think, my dear, that is, I fancy you will find that however much Olivia Seaford may admire Philip's talents, she does not altogether disagree with some of your other well-wishers in her opinion of——"

"Of what?" But Kitty did not retort with quite the fire that might have been expected, and Lady Fanny took courage.

"One does look upon a man in a different light when it becomes a question of marriage. Since you really think you can be happy with Philip Ambrose, and since he—and at his age he ought to know—considers he can make you so——"

"Oh, I don't know that he thinks about *that*, it is for me to make him happy; and, mother, I ought to be proud and willing—you always say the wife should study the husband's wishes."

"Yes, yes, my child, yes."

"So that if Philip—I know Philip is rather arbitrary, but I think father needn't have talked of his 'Knock-me-down manner,' and before the children too. I wish you and father liked him better," murmured Kitty, plaintively.

"You shall teach us, dear." Now that the thing was done, Lady Fanny was resolute to see it in a cheerful light. "And I only spoke of this," she added, "because I think Olivia, much as she was attracted by Philip,

did feel that there was an—an incongruity—that, in short, he was not the best possible husband for you. I don't want you to be disappointed when you and Olivia meet, and they may return any day now."

"I don't care who is disappointed, I shall stick to Philip. And I don't believe, and I can't believe, that Olivia ever said that about an incongruity."

"Kitty! Did I say Olivia?"—but Kitty had turned away, and after a minute's thought, her mother was glad that she had done so.

"Has she the least idea that those two were talked about in the summer?" queried the colonel one day, when alone with his wife. "Kitty seems so monstrous sure that Olivia will be delighted with the marriage, whereas—oh, I am not saying there was anything more than talk, but there's no doubt they laid themselves open to that; and my belief is that that poor thing was shocked when she found how far she'd gone—in the way of braving conventionality, that's all I mean," scenting protest, "and that she would be thankful to see and hear no more of Philip Ambrose. I can't help thinking that, though you know I have given up the rest as you bid me."

"And I fancy you are right, John."

Somewhat to his surprise the calm rejoinder fell readily from Lady Fanny's lips; "I am so glad you take a more rational view of the matter now," proceeded she, "that has been my feeling all along. And it is an additional reason for my wishing this hasty and I must call it ill-judged engagement had never taken place, that it will bring unpleasantness to Olivia from every point of view."

"It will that, with a vengeance. It has already broken Kitty's allegiance—the little minx; I could scarcely believe my ears when she started airing her

opinions, criticising in the coolest manner the friend whose very name used to make her stand up upon her tail—and that but the other day! And even if Olivia can stand this—and it's odds but she'll take it philosophically—there's the nuisance of having the change due to Ambrose. You think it is due to Ambrose, don't you?"

"Not wilfully. But he has concentrated Kitty's whole warm-hearted little being upon himself, and she never could take in more than one person at a time." Lady Fanny smiled and then sighed. "I should not have minded, if only that person had been——"

"Any other living soul than that long-necked, long-jawed, hectoring, domineering prig, confound him! Confound the whole damned——"

The door opened.

"What's father stamping about for?" cried innocent Kitty, coming in—but when she beheld the two embarrassed countenances—"don't tell me, don't tell me," she cried afresh, and ran out again.

The colonel advanced his grey moustache almost to his wife's ear.

"Do you think she heard?"

"She guessed." The whisper came back like his own, and a small, hot tear forced its way from the speaker's downcast lids and trickled over her cheek. It was not only Olivia Seaford who had a heavy heart in those days.

And the very next evening came word that the Seafords had arrived.

"You will be going over to The Willow House early, I suppose?" Breakfast over, Lady Fanny addressed her daughter in an easy tone. "Pray give Olivia my love, and tell her the chrysanthemums promise to be quite a success—those chrysanthemums I told you about; Olivia took some pains about them."

But when Kitty returned she had forgotten all about the chrysanthemums, and she was panting from the speed at which she had hastened home.

"Mother, what has Olivia been doing to herself?"

"Doing to herself?" Lady Fanny paused with an inquiring look.

"She looks so—strange—so—changed. So fearfully thin and white and—*what is it?*" Kitty seized her mother's arm, compelling a reply. "Mother, did you know? Did she look like that before she went?"

"She certainly looked ill, my dear; that was partly why they went. But I am concerned to hear her trip has not benefited her; though it is possible that the journey—remember she is just off her journey—and may have been upset by it. Had they a bad crossing?"

"I didn't ask. But do you think—oh, but it can't only be that. Olivia would have said, if it were. And she made no excuse; she was by way of being quite lively and expecting me, and—and all the time I could do nothing but look at her."

"Indeed I am sorry to hear such a poor report. I hoped for better news."

"You *might* have told me. I went in without an idea of anything wrong and I must have shown—she must have seen——"

"Oh, I hope not, Kitty."

"How could I help it? I was quite frightened, and you had never said anything. If you had told me she was like this——"

"But indeed she was not; not when—stop, let me think; I did not see Olivia just before she started. She came over with her husband on the Friday—the Friday we heard of your engagement, and I announced it to them—but after that I never saw them again, for

they left on the Monday following. We had a note from Willie saying he was carrying his wife off rather abruptly, as she was so hard to move that she would not go at all if he did not use force—or some little jest of the kind. He did not put it on her health. Perhaps you will find that when she has recovered from her fatigue she will look more herself? Olivia is a person who goes up and down very rapidly, and she used to be considered delicate—but we always thought her stronger than she gave herself credit for”—and Lady Fanny rambled on, long after Kitty had ceased to listen. She longed and yet shrank from hearing what took place at the interview.

“We talked about Philip, of course.” It was Kitty who at last broached the subject uppermost in both minds—and her mother who was still discanting on health tactics in a vague, discursive fashion ceased on the instant.

“Olivia said I ought to be the chief talker—and so I was. I told her all about it; and that he was coming here next week, and we should call on her together. I said he would expect to be congratulated, though I was sure she thought it was *I* who ought to be congratulated.”

“What did Olivia say to that?” Lady Fanny affected to be seeking something in her workbox, and put the question in a carefully quiet voice.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Kitty.

“Don’t know?” Her mother looked up, and this time her accents had a genuine ring. “Don’t know, my dear? I suppose she said something? But perhaps she does consider——”

“I don’t know what she considers; she always put me off with questions and jokes. She teased me as father does about not being ‘Learned’ and offered to

lend me books—but, mother, Philip doesn't care if I read books or not. I asked him, and he said that wasn't what a man wanted in a wife. I told Olivia so."

"Well?"

"She said she knew Mr. Ambrose's opinion on that point. She spoke rather coldly, as if—you know Olivia does think a good deal of herself and her cleverness—and I couldn't help wondering if Philip had been rude to her?"

Lady Fanny was silent.

"Anyway I shall take him over," reflected Kitty, aloud; "and I thought perhaps we might have a dinner-party——"

"Oh, not another dinner-party. No, really I cannot—I could not; the—the last was not so very successful, Kitty."

"But this would be quite different. It is funny to think how different it would be. Philip would hardly bestow a glance on me that night, and now——"

"I will not have it." Goaded to desperation, the unfortunate Lady Fanny spoke up sharply, and then softened as she invariably did towards her poor little foolish Kitty at this crisis. "Forgive me, dear, I did not mean to vex you. But you must be content without our entertaining Philip otherwise than as a family party. You see for yourself that the Seafords and he are not quite so friendly as they have been."

"Mother, I never said so, I never thought so. Why will you and father always insist on that, when it was merely that we were mistaken in thinking they were more friendly than they were? When Philip comes you will see. You will see that he will want to go over there—with me, of course—and will be glad to meet Olivia here, and we shall all be as merry as possible together. Only that *I* shall be Philip's one this time;"

and she laughed gleefully. Already she had forgotten all about Olivia's altered looks.

It was Ambrose who was the next to speak of them.

He had agreed with outward alacrity and some inward emotion of another kind, to accompany his fiancée on the call she had so much at heart ; but all her prattle on the way to The Willow House failed to silence other voices which were inconveniently audible to his inward ear, as he recognised every familiar, too familiar, landmark.

Hitherto he had found an excuse for always walking in another direction during his brief visit to the Thatchers ; but now that Olivia was again at home, he had no desire to delay the moments for which he was now and again half disposed to consider he was paying a big price. He told himself that it was not all beer and skittles being an engaged man. He flourished his engagement about, but—for one thing he wished he had not to walk out with Kitty.

At Scarborough, where the pair were the cynosure of all eyes, this was all very well—but in country lanes which afforded nothing to see or to comment upon, and which he was obliged to traverse slowly to suit her pace, the case was different. Often he was silent half the time, and this possibly stood him in good stead now—for they reached the Seafords' door ere he had emitted half a dozen utterances, and yet she noticed nothing amiss.

Mentally he despised her for not noticing. It might be a relief to have an obtuse companion at the moment, but an obtuse companion for life ! Kitty would never know when he was anxious, dejected, heavy-spirited—Olivia Seaford had reflected every passing mood.

If he were sensitive on any given point, would that point be kept out of view by Kitty ? To Olivia it simply did not exist.

On the other hand, how exquisitely she had understood the precise though undefined item which most contributed to some sense of delight—he had never needed to tell her what it was, often he could not have told, but their spirits were so in touch that thought to thought passed spontaneously and involuntarily.

All of this had been carefully kept out of sight by Ambrose ever since he had resolved on his present course of action—but to-day the dreary sky and moaning wind of a November afternoon were not in greater contrast to the glorious sunshine of August with the land-rail's note chirruping from every loaded cornfield, than was his present lugubrious frame of mind to the joyous one of that bygone period.

They entered the hall, the spacious, softly-carpeted, fire-warmed hall.

It was as a cool and shady place that Ambrose remembered it—a place where he occasionally took refuge if the heat were great outside, and banks of flowers at that time concealed the hearth where now huge logs of wood sparkled and flamed,—but there was still the same air of luxury and repose, the same subtle fragrance, the same suggestion of *her* presiding and adorning presence.

“Aren't you coming?” said Kitty, looking round. He was standing still, permitting her to go in alone, but now he hurried forward and all but pressed into the room before her. In truth he hardly knew what he was doing.

It was all a dream—and as a dream Ambrose looked back upon it when once more the two emerged into the dank and chill November twilight.

He shivered ; and if he had longed to be alone on his way thither, how much more did he fret and chafe at the “Senseless gabble” (ah ! poor Kitty) which now tormented his ears.

“Yes—yes—certainly—yes;” the mechanical response grew suspiciously monotonous, and still she held on; he wondered if she would ever stop, would ever cease to find something new and unfortunate to say?

One thing alone stood out clear to his own vision; Olivia was not the Olivia he had left two months before; not the Olivia of whom he had been thinking in the interval—and no one had remarked upon this change nor prepared him for it. Suddenly he roused himself.

“Mrs. Seaford looks ill. Have none of you noticed that she looks ill?”

“Indeed, we have; but to-day she looked better than usual,” there was no alteration of tone, no consciousness on Kitty’s part elicited by the sharp demand; she ran on smoothly: “When Olivia first came back from Paris she looked *dreadful*.”

“And you never told me!”

“Told you?”

In spite of herself Kitty turned a pair of astonished eyes upon the speaker, who continued unabashed:—

“She is a mere shadow of her former self, she who was the very picture of health—not of robust health, but of something infinitely more bewitching. Her beauty was of a higher order,” continued he in a vehement undertone and as though talking only to himself—“she was ethereal, exquisite—and now it is gone—gone;” and he hurried along through the gathering darkness, unconscious that his companion had dropped behind. For the first time Kitty experienced a pang of jealousy.

“I’m glad, at any rate, that he has the sense not to press for a speedy marriage,” remarked Colonel Thatcher, having seen his guest off the next day. “He is none of

your boiling hot lovers, all fire and fury for the wedding-day. I asked him what his ideas were, and he muttered something about the spring. I was pleased enough, I can tell you."

"It seems that the winter is a very busy time at Oxford," replied Lady Fanny. "Philip seems to have explained it to Kitty's satisfaction."

"He explained it to mine—or, rather, I needed no explanation—I was so delighted that I made no pretence about it. Of course it passed that we didn't like losing Kitty."

"I am surprised that she is content, however," recommenced the colonel, after a pause; "I thought she had been already at you about her finery. Surely there was a talk of Christmas, when she first came home?"

"It must either be at Christmas or at Easter, you know, John. An Oxford don cannot get away during terms."

"That means we shall have to have him coming and going all the winter through," reflected he, ruefully. "Plague on it, I didn't think of that. However, he's off for the present; that's one thing."

"But he comes back next week."

The colonel stopped as he was leaving the room.

"What? Comes back? Next week! You don't say next week? Nonsense, you can't mean next week?"

"I am afraid I do. He told Kitty so, at least. He did not say it to me."

"Only told Kitty?"—the colonel looked relieved, "and said nothing to you? Then there's some mistake. You may depend upon it there's some mistake. He couldn't be so deuced ill-bred as to make arrangements for coming to your house without having the civility to ask if it would be convenient?"

She was silent.

"I say he couldn't," proceeded the colonel, loudly, "no man could."

"Circumstanced as he is, Philip may consider himself a privileged person."

"*He* may, but *I* don't. I don't care what he considers himself; it's not for him to consider himself anything. Do you mean to tell me that because a man is going to marry your daughter, you think he has a right to invade your house at any time, whether it suits you or not? Do you mean to tell me that? Then it's time, indeed——"

"John, be reasonable. Do not work yourself up——"

"I'll work myself up if I choose. Work myself up, indeed," fumed he, "I have got to accept this confounded marriage, I suppose, but——" he took a turn up and down the room and stopped in front of her sofa. "I'm a brute to vent my ill-temper upon you, Fanny—you hate the whole thing as much as I do, and it's a shame to make it worse for you than it is already. But it's no use disguising our feelings from each other. Let me speak or I shall burst. I can't think how we could ever be taken in by Ambrose as we were. There's scarcely a thing he does or says that doesn't irritate one. The long and the short of it is he isn't a gentleman,"—and bang went the colonel's stick upon the floor.

Then he took another turn and resumed. "Now, there's Willie Seaford; plain City man; you may catch him tripping in his speech, and he doesn't always know what to do with his legs in a drawing-room—but do you ever want to tell him so?—do you ever feel inclined to *kick* him? I tell you there isn't a man who knows Seaford—knows him much or little—who hasn't a good word for him; there isn't one of us who hasn't the kindest feeling for him,—indeed, there are some who

think—and I won't say I don't myself—that fine woman as she is, Seaford's wife isn't worthy of her husband. Oh, if I could have had *him* ! ”

And Lady Fanny made no comment, and in her heart echoed “ If I could have had him ! ”

Let us now see how the individual in such disrepute at The Grange felt on his part towards its inmates. If Colonel Thatcher experienced a growing inclination to kick his future son-in-law, it must be confessed that Ambrose had frequently a desire of a similar nature, though the kicking in his case was devoid of a precise object.

He would fain have kicked—he already did kick inwardly at all and everything connected with his present position. There were times when he alleged—with what justice our readers may decide for themselves—that he had been run in for it; that he had not weighed the matter on its merits; and that if Mrs. Hothfield, the Rushingtons, and Kitty's surroundings generally had not in a manner hedged him in and shown what was expected of him, he would not have been where he now was.

There were times, too, when he muttered that it was Olivia Seaford whom he had to thank for getting him into such a hole. If he had never met that siren, never been caught by her beauty and her charm, he would have been a free man to-day. She had entangled him in her mesh, and then cast him out wounded and weakened to be the prey of smaller fry, one of whom—but at this point there would perhaps arise a kindlier emotion to check the onslaught.

Poor little Kitty ! After all, it was not her fault that she was so enamoured of his lordly self. She could not know to what she owed the handkerchief so lightly thrown, so quickly repented of.

No, not repented of. It would not do to repent; and once detached from her home belongings, once away from the influence of her insufferable parents, she would be moulded to his will, and make him a good little wife.

He could not, of course, expect companionship, and would certainly receive no assistance from Kitty intellectually,—but on that head he would be no worse off than many of his friends, indeed those who had superior wives had often the dowdiest and most repulsive-looking women to go about with. Kitty's looks, and dress, and bright, gay, winning demeanour would command admiration anywhere, while her noble connections? He was not above reckoning even the surly Uncle Robert, who had taken no notice of him whatever, as an asset.

So that had Olivia Seaford met her former friend with conventional smiles and suitable congratulations, there is no reason to suppose that he would not have responded to them with some measure of the complacency he had once promised himself. Unfortunately for his peace of mind where was the gay welcome, the frank address which was to be met by an attitude of sublime equanimity calculated to keep Mrs. Seaford in her place?

He had meant to be very much taken up with his betrothed; to have all his eyes and ears for her, and to be totally devoid of any *arrière pensée* which might be considered a tribute to Olivia.

Olivia would perhaps refer to the past—that was to be expected—but he would show scanty interest in it; indeed, he would affect to have forgotten any little events or incidents he might be supposed to remember. This also had been carefully thought out,—and now there was never an allusion!

In truth, it took all Olivia's strength, taxed it to its utmost to present herself as she did, a gentle-mannered, low-voiced hostess, solicitous for the comfort of her guests, regretful that she was alone to entertain them, and scrupulous whenever addressing herself to the one to include the other. This much she could do, and steadily and patiently it was done,—but where no concealment availed was in the colourless cheeks, the hollowed temples,—while there was a droop at the corners of the mouth which scarce disappeared even in a smile.

"You think you got along all right though?" Willie inquired after this first visit. "I would have stayed with you in a moment, you know, if you had let me."

"It was better as it was, dear."

By this time it was tacitly understood between them that her secret trouble, which he was allowed to know about, but not to talk about, had reference to Ambrose, and though he was careful to make no direct allusion to this, in his anxiety he let it slip now.

"Your being present might have been misunderstood," continued Olivia, lifting her eyes to his with a sweet, steady look that permitted, nay invited his to look back; "I would not have it thought that you—and I—you know, Willie."

"I know," said he, simply.

But naturally Philip Ambrose did not; and all his former conviction that the Seafords were an ill-matched, disunited couple returned in force on seeing before him a wan, trembling creature, with impaired beauty, who so far from challenging him to reinstate the past, seemed scarce able to cope with the present, and yet was alone to face it.

He had been wrong, surely he had been wrong in

leaving her to the mercy of a husband she despised? Surely he had been too hasty? God! how ill she looked!

For hours afterwards he could think of nothing else than of how ill she looked.

And every thought made him wilder with himself than before. If he had only waited—waited but a month, but a fortnight—it was precisely a fortnight after his flight from the cottage that saw him parading Scarborough with Kitty Thatcher as his affianced bride—he might, he must have learnt the truth; he could have wrung it out of the boy Rushington, for instance,—there was his opportunity.

But since that was lost, why should he not discover for himself?—and with this working in his brain, he made the casual announcement which so discomposed Colonel Thatcher.

Kitty stood to it that she had made no mistake, was it likely she should mistake? Philip had not told her the day, but he had said he was coming, and she seemed rather pleased than otherwise that it should have been said to her and to her alone.

“But we must know how to prepare for him,” urged Lady Fanny.

“And he can’t expect a room to be always at his disposal,” grunted the colonel.

“But he will send a line the day before, or perhaps the same day,” replied Kitty. “And he knows we have no one else coming.”

It was on the tip of her father’s tongue to say: “Then *have* some one else; it will be a good lesson in manners for this free-and-easy gentleman,”—but he forbore. He had promised his wife to be forbearing; and the result was that although neither letter nor post-card gave intimation of Mr. Ambrose’s approach, when

he did walk in late one afternoon, he was not turned from the door.

"Found I could get away," said he, casually; "so here I am with my bag." After a minute's pause he added: "I walked up, and left a book with Mrs. Seaford by the way." Had there been any possibility of this last not coming to light, he would have held his tongue about it—but as it was, to drop it out lightly was the next best thing to be done.

"If I had known, I would have met you at the station," said Kitty, clinging to him.

To be correct, she had said this before mention was made of the call; her hands loosed and she stepped from his side with a little cloud upon her brow at Olivia's name.

And she did not inquire how long he stayed at The Willow House, nor even if he found its mistress at home? It was as well she did not; it was better still she was not there to see.

Olivia, who was sitting quietly by the fire with a book in her lap, whose pages had not been able to hold her attention longer, was not startled by the sound of the door-bell—for as luck would have it, Thomas chanced to be looking out, and had no choice but to admit a visitor, and usher him straight into the drawing-room,—so that it was the name of the man with whom her thoughts were actually occupied, and his presence before her eyes, which awakened her from her reverie.

And he was alone—the door shut behind him.

And it must be borne in mind that there was no open quarrel between these two; that no word had been spoken, so far as Olivia knew, which could ever have conveyed unpleasantness to Ambrose; and that he was by this time partially and ready to be wholly convinced that none such had emanated from her.

They met therefore as friends ; it was impossible to meet otherwise. The book which he carried and which had formed some part of the conversation on his previous call with Kitty, afforded an opening ; and he tendered it respectfully, while she could not but receive it graciously.

Albeit surprised by his appearance, this was no time to show surprise ; and it was perhaps well for Olivia that she had had no time to analyse her emotions beforehand, for now she was able, even better than before, to command her voice and manner, and if there were a shade more reserve in the former and dignity in the latter than on the previous occasion, these did not enlighten,—nor, he would have said, deceive her companion. He sat down prepared for a long stay,—a long, delightful, fruitful interview.

All conditions were favourable to this. The quiet house, the quiet hour, the secrecy he had preserved as to his own movements, the knowledge he had of her habits—even the day he had chosen, a Thursday, Mr. Seaford's late day—he had taken all into account, and now to reap the reward of forethought and precaution.

"Would you ring the bell for me?" said Olivia, easily reclining in her chair—his was close to the bell-handle, hers further off.

He rang mechanically ; continuing a disquisition on a new topic which was to introduce another, and gradually that other led back to one,—the chain had been mentally forged beforehand, and its last link, skilfully handled, would land them under the elm-tree, where it had been the subject of their final *tête-à-tête*, and then—and then?—so absorbed was he in it all that the ringing of the bell might have been an automaton's act. He started, however, at its results.

"Let me know how soon the dog-cart will be ready,

Thomas. And tell James to bring it round for me. I am so sorry to seem rude, Mr. Ambrose," continued Olivia, in her most courteous accents, "but I am going to meet my husband directly"—(Ambrose had been there about a quarter of an hour)—"and I have to go round by the village first."

"Mr. Seaford—but is not this Thursday?" He bit his lip, but the words were out and there was no recalling them. "Excuse me, but you see I know your ways so well," he murmured.

She understood; her eyes flashed; but she restrained herself.

"Willie is no longer late on Thursdays. He is not late on any day now. I am sure you will kindly excuse me?"—and she looked at her watch.

"Are you fit to drive in an open dog-cart?" tried Ambrose, next. The check was so unexpected, yet seemed in a manner to be so involuntarily administered, that he rose from his seat bewildered and confused. "The air is very raw to-day, and you don't look strong."

Because she had been sitting in the house when she ought to have been out of doors, Olivia averred; she had been leading such an out-of-door life of late; and as for open carriages, she and her husband lived in them in Paris. Paris was not warm in November, not warmer than the south of England—and she ran on garrulously—even following him to the door to send a message to Kitty, and thank him again for so kindly bringing the book—and he was at the gate and on his way to The Grange, ere it occurred to him that he had literally been turned out of the house.

But presently he smiled knowingly to himself. She was at her old tricks, trying to take him in, making use of this dummy husband of hers, in order to tantalise and

stimulate his ardour. He would be upsides with her. He would force her hand.

Accordingly it was "Here I am again, Mrs. Seaford"—and three days later Philip Ambrose with a feint of raillery in his accents, but something else writ upon his brow, was ushered into Olivia's drawing-room.

"I want to have a talk with you, may I?" said he, plainly. "You will not dismiss me to-day? I have come on purpose to see you. I have something to say to you."

He was trying to hold her hand, but it was haughtily withdrawn. A calm reply was necessary, however.

"I am at your disposal, Mr. Ambrose. Some difficulties about your writings?"

"Not that; the difficulty is of another nature, can you not guess it? Yet I should have thought, I felt sure that you—what do you think of this marriage of mine?"—he flung himself into a chair and fixed his eyes upon her face. She could not escape him now.

"This—this marriage—of yours?" repeated Olivia. If her voice was faint, at least her bearing was high. No air could have expressed more withering amazement.

"Aye, this marriage. Surely it astonished you? Surely you feel——"

"I feel? Pardon me, Mr. Ambrose, do I hear you aright? You wish to discuss your marriage with *me*? Extraordinary!"

"But why extraordinary?" He drew his chair eagerly nearer. "We are friends, and can talk as friends. We need not be bound by ordinary trammels, let us throw them aside. I ask you, as one whose opinion I value more than words can express, as one who may speak and will be listened to with the utmost respect and—and more,—*what do you think of my marriage?*"

"And I decline to think anything. It is a most—a most improper question to put to me. I—I can scarcely believe you are in earnest."

"But I am most deeply in earnest. Look at me, do you not see—can you not see?"

"I only see that you are acting in the strangest manner, and—" she checked herself and made an effort to avert the thunder in the air, "putting me in a very awkward position. You have given way to impulse, I suppose—and to an impulse you will yourself be the first to repent of. Some little misunderstanding between you and Kitty——"

"No, Mrs. Seaford; no." He waved his hand impatiently. "No, you do not put me off with that pretence of miscomprehension. There is no misunderstanding. There is no quarrel. It is simply that I am in a strait. And oh, you *do* know, you *must* know, what I mean. And though you are reluctant to own it, I will not be content without your owning it. You have experienced, you are experiencing, the sufferings I foresee for myself. Your marriage is what mine will be."

White to the lips, Olivia rose to her feet and recoiled with a shudder he could almost see.

"You say this to me?"

He started, and his eyes opened—then a laugh followed.

"Come, Mrs. Seaford, why so melodramatic? It is patent to all the world that yours was a *mariage de convenance*—and though I have no doubt it has turned out excellently—nay, it is for that very reason that I look to you to reassure me. One can get along all right, can one, without any of that communion of soul poets rave about? *You* do—you jog along comfortably enough, and look elsewhere for sympathy in your higher feelings and aspirations? Is it not so?"

"You—you say this to me?" repeated she. But her heart was full to bursting. Had she not once said it to herself?

"Because it is true," pursued Ambrose, undauntedly, "and truth will out. Your husband is a good fellow; kind and generous and easy-going; and you have an affection for him, no doubt—as I should have for Kitty, substituting other attributes. She would be a good little *Haus-frau*; a cheerful, domestic little lady to preside over my family concerns,—but both you and I——"

"—Disassociate our names, if you please."

Her back was straight as a dart, her eyes sparkled, but still the infatuated man, obsessed by one idea, pursued it.

"Pray hear me; pray compose yourself. I am conscious of being too bald, too crude—but I cannot mince matters, and I am only giving utterance now to what I have felt from the very beginning of our acquaintance. You are not mated as you ought to be; and though you are resigned to it, you know in your heart—I say, you *know* that you are too good for your husband."

"Too good—for him?" In a hoarse, stammering whisper the syllables dropped almost inaudibly from her lips.

Afterwards she felt as if those should have been a fiery torrent, scorching, scalding, devastating—but at the moment no torrent would come. In this frightful nightmare her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth, and she heard her voice as it were a long, long way off.

And the worst was, oh, far the worst was that she had brought it on herself. In the early days of their intimacy she had permitted Ambrose to see what he should never have seen, and what now she would have given worlds to declare had never existed. The folly, the madness, the wickedness of it! And now it was

past; now she saw the one she held most dear, beloved beyond expression, honoured above every other human being, in his true light—and now she could not dare to lie and say she had always seen him so. Her quivering lips were sealed, but she could look her burning indignation.

“I see,” said Ambrose softly, and he tried to take her hand, but she threw off his touch, and before the eyes of both there rose that other day when——

“But she is only fearful, a woman’s timidity,” reflected he. “Dear Mrs. Seaford,” he recommenced aloud.

“Stop!” cried Olivia. Voice had come at last. “You have spoken to me as you should never have spoken—you have thought what you should never have thought,—but I—I have no right to blame you, or at least your offence is infinitely less than my own,” cried she, passionately. “There was a time when I was blind—blinded by self-love—but oh, that I should ever have put it in your power to taunt me thus! And you would make my shame and folly an excuse for—you would deliberately take false vows upon yourself because you fancy that I once did the same? I never did. I—yes, I will tell the truth—I was a vain, arrogant, ignorant girl when I married, and when I took my husband for my husband I gave him all I had to give of my affection; it was so centred on my despicable self that he had——”

“—But a very small supply,” sneered Ambrose, as she paused for breath, and leaned against the mantelpiece. He began to lose his temper and could not resist the taunt.

Olivia threw him a look of contempt.

“And you thought to trade on that now! But you are too late: I have learned—my lesson. My heart is now my husband’s fully, absolutely. If you cannot

give yours to her to whom you have promised it—if you are deceiving her now——”

“You think I may as well not marry the girl?” He eyed her insolently.

“I pray God you may never marry her. I pray God to keep her from such misery. Marriage with you as you look upon it would be no marriage, it would be a martyrdom.”

“You are complimentary, Mrs. Seaford, but you have had experience.”

She whirled round. “Do not dare say that again, sir; do not dare to compare the past incompleteness of my wedded life, which at its worst could be called by no other name, with the false, cruel, shameful union upon which you propose wilfully to embark. You came here to insult me——”

“No, that I deny,” interposed he, hastily. “It is you who have chosen to be insulted. You have never allowed me clearly to express my views. I was too plain-spoken, and women cannot stand plain-speaking. If I had clothed my meaning in ambiguous phrases——”

“Nothing could have made me endure it. I should have read it, and loathed it through all.”

“Yet once you allowed me to hope that we were dear friends.” Ambrose possessed a marvellous power of modulating his naturally harsh, incisive accents to tenderness, and Olivia in her pride and passion stood before him so inexpressibly beautiful, so terribly, torturingly alluring that he was moved to put it forth as a last hope. His eyes narrowed as he watched its effect. Its effect was such that he rose to go.

But still he could not go. He was not wont to be beaten. He hesitated.

“Are we to be friends no more?”

"No more. Never more." She did not tremble now; her voice rang out clear and steady as a bell.

"Good-bye;" he held out his hand. She swept him a curtsey so low that ere her bent head raised itself again, the door had closed—banged.

She listened. Not a sound. She looked. A figure was hurrying through the gloom outside.

One moment she pressed her hand upon her burning brow and then—she went straight to her husband's room and told him all.

But that night Olivia was taken very ill.

CHAPTER XV.

CONCLUSION.

THE collapse which many of her friends had foreboded and which all her husband's care had been unable to avert had come at last, and the evening which saw Olivia carried to her room and laid upon her bed was the last she was to spend downstairs for months to come.

But we do not purpose to enter into that period. Suffice it to say that it passed, that anxiety gave place to hope, next hope to joyful conviction, and, finally, that one bright February morning, when the sun was strong, and snowdrops and crocuses were bursting into bloom on every side, there issued from the garden door of The Willow House a once familiar form on which from hidden quarters many eyes were bent.

"Our dearest Olivia took her first stroll outside to-day," wrote Lady Fanny Thatcher of the important event; "a very short one, of course, for it must be step by step that she regains her strength, but her improvement if slow is steady, and there is no reason now to apprehend any relapse. I was over at The Willow House this afternoon, and it was delightful to see poor Willie's face. He has had a long, sad watch, and there were days, as you know, on which we almost feared to question him; but, thank God, his unceasing tenderness and patience have their reward at last, and this

blessed change in his dear wife, which is such a joy to us all, is but the outward symbol of a still more wondrous one within. Olivia is a new creature. It is not for us to pry into the source, humanly speaking, of her regeneration, but none can fail to see that she has been led by some mysterious path, and it may be through much anguish of soul, to her Master's feet. She is deeply humble, as befits one who was so recently awakened to a knowledge of herself. Olivia will never fall into the common error of the *over-talkative* on such high matters, but her life will show. Oh, my Kitty"—for it was to Kitty that her mother thus wrote with a flowing pen and a full heart—"I could scarce refrain from weeping this afternoon when I saw that sweet face, transformed as it now is by the radiance of perfect peace within. But you will see for yourself when you return home; and it will be a double pleasure to have my darling Kitty among us again now that, instead of dreading the influence of this friend of hers over my little girl's susceptible nature, I shall be only too thankful to see it exerted and I trust responded to. When, dear, do you think of turning your steps homeward?"

So Kitty is not at home at this period, though Lady Fanny still writes of 'The Grange by that name? And she writes moreover as though Kitty had been some time abroad and were far afield.

So Kitty is, thanks to her Uncle Robert of all people—Uncle Robert who is now a full-blown peer of the realm, having come into his inheritance in the interval—and thanks also to something else which has happened, not of much national importance, but of possible interest to our readers all the same. We will let Uncle Robert give his account of this other event.

"She couldn't stick him, that's the fact. It was a

monstrous silly business at the outset; and what my sister and her doddering old husband—John's a bit of an ass, always was—were about to give in to it, I can't imagine. My niece is as pretty a little creature as you would wish to see, and to let her throw herself away on a fellow twenty years older than herself, with nothing to recommend him but a sort of reputation for piecing together mummies and skeletons—he'd a mummy face himself, some one told me—and Kitty never had any turn that way, none of our girls have—was rank idiocy. She had seen nobody, never been taken out into society, and met the don at a seaside watering-place! At any rate, the engagement came off there. Fanny made the best of it, poor soul. However, when it came to the scratch, Kitty showed her blood; so when I found it was off, I wired 'Send her to me,' and we brought her straight off along with our party to Egypt. Thought she could see mummies here, if she wanted 'em, without being hooked in for matrimony." He paused to chuckle, and presently beamed with a knowing look. "When Miss Kitty returns home in the spring, she'll think twice before she runs her head into a noose again."

Nor, although the above did not altogether state the case in its true bearings, were there found any to dispute it, since it was decided by the "Doddering" old colonel (how furious he would have been)—and his ever-prudent counsellor, that as little as might be should transpire respecting the rupture between Ambrose and his betrothed, which was the result of his fateful interview with Olivia Seaford.

"If there's one thing worse than doing a thing in a hurry it's *undoing* it in a hurry," quoth the colonel, sententiously. "Kitty's made a mess of it both ways, and we shall have to bear the brunt."

But this was before Uncle Robert's telegram ap-

peared, and, short as it was, Colonel Thatcher proclaimed that he read between the lines.

"This is a pat on the back for her, eh, wife? He can't be civil enough to write to us; we are still in his black books, I suppose?—but Kitty is to be forgiven, and restored to favour, though it is she who did the whole job. Humph!"

"She suffered for it, poor child; and you know, John, it is much more important that she should be looked kindly on by her uncle, than that we should be cleared of blame. Nothing you or I can say would ever alter Robert's opinion, or convince him that we were not culpably weak in yielding to Kitty's wishes, (having no daughters of his own, he does not realise the difficulties of parents who have),—and now he is really kind and generous in providing for her this change of scene and thought just when she needs both so badly."

"But what if she comes back with a black man?"

He was appeased; he could joke about it; and Kitty, a little alarmed and only half-disposed to be grateful, was despatched to Grosvenor Square.

Three months afterwards she was raving about the wonders of the desert—the marvellous desert—should she ever be able to make up her mind to quit the desert?

"However did we get such a little flibbertigibbet of a daughter?" ejaculated the colonel, "but"—his brow puckered, "I'm thankful she's not in *India* at any rate."

Lady Fanny's letter, of which an extract has been given, was not, it may be feared, of such vital importance to Kitty as its writer imagined—but as we possibly care more about the tranquil scene it depicted, than the more exciting and easily-imagined ones which were of prior consequence in the latter's eyes, we will return to The Willow House, where Olivia, who is now on the high road to recovery, is awaiting a visitor.

That visitor is Lady Fanny—we had almost said “Of course,”—but this would have been unjust to the neighbourhood, which, considering Mrs. Seaford’s former attitude towards it, demeaned itself very creditably at this juncture—every house sending delegates charged with inquiries and sympathy, and later on congratulations—and it was an agreeable surprise to those who rang the door-bell at this latter period to be told Mrs. Seaford would be glad to see them in the drawing-room.

“I am not always glad, you know,” she smiled to Willie, afterwards, “but I thought I had better make a start in the reform code you drew up for me. So in they came to-day, a whole bevy. Some were left out in the carriage at first—but I sent for them, and had up tea, and really it was quite pleasant, at least to me—and—I think, I *think*, Willie,” she added, modestly, “that they enjoyed themselves too.”

This had happened more than once, but it was the friend for whose coming Olivia always looked out with eager anticipation, who was expected on the present occasion, and Olivia had moreover a special reason for a special eagerness as she sprang up from her sofa. She had been promised that she should hear what till now it had been deemed unwise for her to hear; and long before Willie would sanction her doing so, had confessed to him that she ardently desired to question Kitty’s mother about Ambrose, and to hear the whole story of this broken engagement.

“If you’re afraid they will think it strange your not doing so,” said he, “they won’t a bit. They know that exciting topics are to be avoided.”

“But, Willie, dear, it wouldn’t excite me in the least. I only feel a little—curious.”

“Only a little curious?” He eyed her dubiously.

"Well, then, not a little, but a very great deal," retorted she, boldly. "I do assure you, Willie, I have not another feeling now that I know Kitty is happy again. If I had had to think of her as fretting after him or even as fretting because of him, it would have been different. But now I truly only want to know the story of it all because—oh, Willie, *you* know. And you are just as inquisitive as I. Yes, you are—so if you are good, sir, you shall have it retailed to you."

"I'll be mighty good for that, Olivia."

"Then you will look in at The Grange as you pass this morning, and say to Lady Fanny that I am quite well enough for a good talk. She will understand. And ask if she can come to-morrow, and bring her answer to-night? And Willie?"

"Any more commands?"

"You will make it *quite* plain what I want, won't you? Because without your leave I know she won't speak."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I've—I've tried her," said Olivia, laughing.

"Yes, your husband said—that is, I gathered from what he said that the restrictions imposed on us all hitherto might now be withdrawn," said Lady Fanny, settling herself with the solemnity due to the occasion,—but all in a moment—"my dear Olivia," she cried, throwing studied phraseology to the winds, "I have been simply dying to tell you all."

"And I," said Olivia, in a lower, but yet a firm voice, "am just as anxious to hear all."

"He came back from you that night," proceeded Lady Fanny, "it was hardly night, but it was, let me see"—pausing and casting about in her mind, "after seven o'clock."

"After seven? He left me before six." It came back upon the speaker that she had heard the clock chime six as she passed through the hall on her way to seek her husband shortly after Ambrose left. The same thought struck both. He had purposely lingered on the road, the short mile between the two houses—he had traversed it back and forwards, killing time, battling with himself.

"You may imagine we were surprised to see him walk in," proceeded Lady Fanny, taking up her thread, "not having been given any intimation of his approach, beyond a vague word to Kitty which might or might not have meant anything. We heard his voice in the hall, and she flew out—but when they came in together, I could see in a minute something was wrong. She tried, poor child, to look pleased and propitiatory—but his face wore a most disagreeable expression, and he would hardly vouchsafe me a word. I was the only other person present, for my husband was in his room dressing for dinner. I had to go and tell him Mr. Ambrose was there. My dear Olivia, you can imagine how uncomfortable it all was; for directly we re-assembled it was felt there was a strain, a something in the air—and though we could not divine what it was, it infected the whole party. Nothing Kitty could say was right. Philip—Mr. Ambrose—snapped her up, chid her before our very faces. I could see her father was writhing with indignation, and expected every moment that he would be unable to suppress it. But he behaved wonderfully; he told me afterwards that he was literally afraid to speak. He is quick, you know; and there was something so unpleasant, so ill-bred and lacking in all dignity and self-restraint about Mr. Ambrose, that I myself could scarce sit calmly in my chair. Still, we little thought how the evening was to

end. My dear, am I tiring you? Shall I cut this short?"

"Oh, no, no;" Olivia would not have had it cut short for worlds.

"The hours dragged," proceeded Lady Fanny, resuming her narrative with unction, "and still though Philip (as we had to call him then) had ostensibly come to see Kitty, he made no attempt to render himself agreeable to her, nor even to speak to her. I suggested that as he had only come for the one night—he had said so at dinner—that the two should retire to the little room at the back, John's den, where I had given orders the fire should be kept up, thinking they would like this. But at first neither seemed to care about it; Kitty, I fancied, took her cue from Philip; had he been willing, she would have been willing,—as it was she sat down by me on the sofa. Then all at once, in the very midst of something I was saying, he sprang up, and approached us. I could not think what was coming, and as for poor Kitty, she looked terrified. I could feel her shrink when he seized her by the arm, and, muttering something about not putting off any longer, hurried her from the room. Her father and I were left staring at each other,—had we suspected the meaning of it all we should, of course, have felt differently, for however unparalleled his extraordinary behaviour was, it had at least the merit of having a distinct aim—whereas it seemed to us much as if he were trying to pick a quarrel with Kitty for the sheer pleasure of bullying her. Well, my dear, there we sat giving vent to our indignation to each other, and lamenting most heartily that Philip Ambrose had ever crossed our path, when we heard Kitty come out and go upstairs. We waited, thinking that perhaps she had only gone to fetch something,—but as she did not return, I urged John to go and confront Philip—which at last

he did. It seemed hours before he reappeared, and his face—his voice! He was trying to conceal his satisfaction beneath a frigid mask, and Philip, who stood in the doorway, also wore an air of satisfaction more openly displayed. He interrupted John who had begun to speak, and passed him, coming on to me.

“‘Colonel Thatcher will explain,’ he said; ‘I am returning to Oxford to-night, and have only time to catch the last train.’ Then he went on to add something about my always having been kind to him, and regretting to give me pain.

“Pain? If he had only known! However we shook hands mechanically, and John saw him out. Luckily there was a moon, and no doubt he got all right to the station, and caught his train—or at least, if he did not, we never heard of it, for, my dear Olivia,” wound up her ladyship dramatically, “we have never seen nor heard of Philip Ambrose from that day to this!”

“What reason did he give?” Olivia had listened intently, losing not a syllable, and seeing in her mind’s eye the whole little pitiful tragedy enacted; and now after a pause she spoke.

“None. Or I should say none that ought not to have been thought of before. The engagement, he declared, had been a mistake, and Kitty felt it a mistake, as he did. He had ordered her to feel this, I suppose—and she, hypnotised as she was by him, said whatever she was made to say. But though she was often a little hurt at his demeanour, and latterly a little—a little jealous of you, Olivia——”

“Ah!” For all her resolution Olivia could not repress a start.

“Believe me, Kitty never reproached you,” whispered Lady Fanny, pressing her hand, “but she felt, she did feel sometimes, that unconsciously you exercised a

fascination for her lover, and that it made him overbearing and inconsiderate towards her. Dear Olivia, I should not have mentioned this, but that I think without words we understand each other, and you will not mind—you need not mind—my saying that I expect we owe to *you* this fortunate release from an entanglement which, had it led to its natural sequence, would have made us all miserable. Philip could not shake off the impression you made on him, and his repugnance—but no more. Kitty, as I said, was jealous, but she never foresaw herself thrown aside; and though she behaved as well as could have been expected from one so young, and so utterly taken at unawares, she allowed to us—to her father and me—that Philip had behaved most cruelly towards her, literally forcing a renunciation from her lips and then feigning to accept it.”

“Coward!” flashed Olivia.

“Precisely. Just what my husband said. Philip Ambrose is a coward, though it is a strange word to connect with a man of his arbitrary, overbearing temperament. There are many kinds of cowards,” reflected Lady Fanny, “and what obviously weighed with Philip was an acute dread of the world’s censure. He preferred—indeed he insisted upon it, and perhaps it was best, that it should be given out that the engagement was broken off by mutual consent.”

“Perhaps it *was* best, you know, Lady Fanny, and he *may* have considered Kitty’s dignity. Besides, if he no longer desired to marry her——”

“She certainly did not wish to marry him. That was true, therefore we could say it with clear consciences,—and if it saved Mr. Ambrose from opprobrium—well, let it.”

“And Kitty?”

“It was a shock to her; it could not fail to be. And

yet I think—I fancy there was almost immediate relief. She had grown to be afraid of him; and though when he was present she could think and care only for what he wished, in his absence she would droop, and I am convinced had many secret misgivings. Often she looked dejected and depressed. It was a fret to her that we could not bring ourselves to like him. There was no sense of harmony in the house; there was estrangement; there was one subject none of us cared to touch,—you know what that feeling is, Olivia.”

Olivia bent her head; she knew.

“What a mercy it was it went no farther,” resumed Lady Fanny, with renewed spirit. “Kitty now writes in the best of spirits. She is having a delightful time, and with a pleasant, congenial family party. Sometimes I cannot help suspecting—only it seems so very soon——” she paused, but Olivia was sitting up, alert in a moment.

“What? Too soon? Oh, not at all too soon—oh, dear no,” she cried, with dancing eyes. “Not at all, dear Lady Fanny, at her age. And—and Kitty must always have some one, you know.”

“So it seems. But really I know nothing, and perhaps I ought not even to guess——” and again the speaker hesitated on the verge of a confidence.

“Then we won’t guess, we’ll only not be able to help guessing,” cried Olivia, merrily. “But do say what?” and she looked for more.

“It is only that my brother Robert writes—and it is a great affair to him to write a letter—it could only have been dictated by—but you shall hear. He writes that we must not be surprised if some one of whom he warmly approves should also be approved of by a certain young lady under his care. It is a pretty broad hint—and though I do not agree in all things

with my brother, I do feel that we can put confidence in his judgment on a matter of this kind."

"Kitty has said nothing herself?"

"Nothing definite. But her epistles are ecstatic—in the old vein—and, and really that is all."

It was enough for Olivia, who felt as though she had drunk a fresh elixir.

Kitty no longer blighted and miserable through her fault! Kitty having "A delightful time" in a foreign land, and writing ecstatically "In the old vein"! It was comfort,—untold, unspeakable comfort. She awaited every post from Egypt with little less anticipation than the parents themselves, and when the great news came, which was not long in coming, she was the first to hear of it, and that within the hour. . . .

And then at last the youthful traveller returned, and shortly afterwards there appeared at The Grange a nice, honest-faced lad—who was older than he looked and was quite old enough, affirmed Uncle Robert—and Olivia, to whom Freddy Upperton was presented the following day, found him quite at home with every one already, and basking in an atmosphere of benignity which it was delightful to witness.

"Got the right sort of chap this time," muttered the colonel in her ear.

And Olivia stayed and stayed, and could scarcely tear herself away. Her heart swelled with thanksgiving; it all seemed too good, far too good to be true.

"But bless me, will she never get back her looks?" Colonel Thatcher came back from escorting out the once brilliant creature he had admired against his will. "Is Olivia always to be like this?" queried he, almost angrily, of his wife.

Lady Fanny could not say; no one could say; no one could predict with any certainty in the matter.

Olivia had undergone a terrible illness, and whether its effect, which was but too visible in her altered appearance, would be permanent or not remained to be seen.

"It's a sad pity—a sad pity," muttered he. Things were going on so well with him and his that he could not bear to think every one else, every one at least whom he cared about and esteemed, was not equally uplifted. For the moment indeed he was quite overcome, wondering what Seaford thought. Seaford had always been so extravagantly proud of his wife's beauty. "It's deuced hard on him," concluded the colonel.

"I doubt if he even sees it," replied Lady Fanny.

"Sees it? He can't help seeing it? Sees it? Is he blind? Don't talk nonsense," growled he. "She was one of a thousand to look at. See her come into a room—Jove, it made every other person in it look small. Oh, I'm not saying, I'm not saying for an instant that I don't prefer Mrs. Seaford as she is—cheerful, sociable, the very life and soul of the party as she was to-day—but I can't help it, I do wish she had kept her looks too. And what's more, I am sorry for Willie's sake."

"And I assure you, my dear, that your mind may be at rest on that score. If Willie Seaford perceives any loss of beauty in his wife, it but endears her to him the more. I verily believe were she a leper he would feel the same."

"That's because he is what he is"—the colonel reflected, and gave in his verdict: "You are right, I dare say. He is as fine a fellow as ever lived—for a plain City man. There are, of course, traditions and instincts—but upon my soul, I believe Willie does just as well without 'em. And he is polished up a bit, too," he summed up in conclusion.

One day Olivia, diving to the bottom of a long-un-

opened drawer of her writing-table started back as if she had seen a snake.

It was only a book bound in white vellum with a gilt clasp which met her eye, but *The Peculiar Book* had once been such a cherished possession and had ministered so copiously to its owner's self-esteem, that she could not look upon it now without emotion. She suspected, more than suspected, in what light its pages would appear. She winced beneath what memory recalled.

Read, however, she would—read, and be ashamed. And the end of all was that those passages which had pleased her best pained her most—but the pain was salutary, and at the close of an hour nothing remained, not even ashes, for the fire was large and hot which burnt up the sheets of Olivia Seaford's great book which was to make such a name for her in the world.

Olivia laughed, a little bitterly perhaps, when all was over—but she made a good story out of it to Willie afterwards, and insisted on his seeing the whole in the light of a joke, which at first he was ill enough inclined to do.

“You tore your book to pieces?” cried he, petrified. “And you took such pains about it, and it is quite a wreck!”

“Oh, Willie!”

“It isn't *that*—you don't suppose I mind about *that*—tear up a hundred books if you like; it is your writing that I mind about, it was sure to be good——”

“No, dear, it was not good; and Willie, it would have grieved and shamed you. Come, we won't be solemn over it. I took myself so very seriously once that this poor old self is going to have a bad time of it now. It had a shock to-day, and is all the better for it. What will be the next, I wonder.”

In the autumn the Seafords went to Stronafalloch, despite Willie's protestations that the accommodation there was hardly fit for a woman and a semi-invalid.

Olivia would go nowhere else, pleading that though she had the misfortune to be the former, she was no longer the latter, or would not be after a sojourn on a Highland moor.

"You promised I should hear the waterfalls and see the eagles, Willie."

But she could see that he had still something on his mind.

"Of course we are not going to be selfish," said she. "You must invite those poor men who are fancying they are to be left out in the cold now. We must have them for at least part of the time."

"I shouldn't think of it," he shook his head. "I was only wondering if it could be managed to get them something in the neighbourhood? Perhaps you would not care even for that?"

"And is it still to be only what *I* care for? Is your poor Olivia to have no chance of paying off, in ever so small a way, that dreadful old balance against her? Isn't she to be allowed to make the very least little self-sacrifice?"—and we can guess the rest.

Of course the men came, and one and all voted Mrs. Seaford charming, and wondered no longer at the boring reminiscences which had provoked their yawns in other days.

And when occasionally they saw husband and wife wander forth together to track a mountain burn to its source, or lose themselves in a deep sunlit corrie, nobody followed, but carefully took other paths. "They are so awfully in love with each other," nodded they aside.

The pure mountain air proved the very breath of life to Olivia, and despite the solitude of the hut, and divers inconveniences attendant thereon, she persuaded her husband to remain there for the blue skies and frosty nights of October—so that by the time they returned south, health and strength were completely restored—but still—but still Colonel Thatcher shook his head and pursed his lip.

“We shall see,” prognosticated Lady Fanny, mysteriously.

And there came a day, an April day, when there was a vast stir and commotion in The Willow House.

Servants bustled hither and thither, grooms rattled out of the stables, the master’s face was seen looking from every window, and the mistress alone was invisible.

A doctor’s carriage, with horses in a foam, dashed to the door, and a great London authority was hailed within.

Thence ensued a hush, a pause of suspense, but when the long, light, summer night gave way to breaking dawn, there came a sound from the upper rooms, the like of which had never before been heard within their walls—the cry of a newborn babe. . . .

To say that the lean, brown-faced old colonel was the first to stand upon the doorstep and hear the tidings is almost, if not absolutely, needless,—he was up and away and back to breakfast, and scarce coherent as he scurried in. “She’s all right, and it’s a boy.”

“A boy? Willie will be glad.”

“Glad? He’d have been glad if it had been a monkey. I saw him. He heard my voice and called down to me. I told him I couldn’t stop a second, you were so anxious. Couldn’t have been more so if it had been your own grandchild. And I think, I believe I heard him say, ‘God bless her,’ or something of the

kind. That settles it—that clinches it. He and his wife—but I say, I shouldn't wonder if, after this, she gets back her looks, eh? What do you think?"

"I should not be in the least surprised," said Lady Fanny, demurely.

And here the story of Olivia ends, in so far as it is of any interest to those who have followed her gradual evolution from an erring, faulty woman into a noble being, admired and beloved by all about her.

Her husband, ever willing to follow where she led, was ready to give religion more place in his thoughts than it had formerly held, although he would never pain Olivia by telling her what was the truth—namely, that he had only been withheld from doing so then by her indifference. They were one in this, as in all else now, so that was enough.

He grew a little stouter under the influence of so much happiness and such pure content—but then he could not always be thinking of Jack Malcolm, and Olivia had an excellent cook, who would place temptation in her master's way.

"You must counteract it by exercise. Come out with me," Olivia would say, and take no denial.

One day she was out and he came to her. "There's something in this paper that will interest you," he said, looking with a little hesitation at a newspaper he held.

"Can't read it now, Willie;" her hands were grimy with garden-mould. "Tell me what it is about,"—and she paused to listen.

"It is about—Ambrose."

"What about him?" There was a slight, involuntary start, but it passed as it came, and she repeated steadily, "What about him?"

“A whole lot. He has got a splendid appointment in America—(America at last, you see, in parenthesis)—and this is an American paper with a terrific laudation of his merits. It makes him out a most illustrious personage. Well, I suppose he is: such a string of honours and distinctions! And this post appears to be one of the plums of the profession, and they say he is the man for it. It appears that he is the biggest swell going in his own line.”

“He is. And it is quite right it should be acknowledged. He deserves success and recognition.”

“There’s a personal bit that is rather—they are so beastly outspoken over there,” continued Willie. “It would be disgusting for an English paper, but I suppose the Yankees think nothing of it. Stop, I’ll read the bit,” and he unfolded the paper and read:—

“‘Though the all-conquering young professor has not yet succumbed to feminine attractions, it remains to be seen how long he will hold out against these in the new country to which he is coming. American girls have “A way wid them,” we all know—and Mr. Ambrose may not be able to tell us presently what he did to-day, that he is a determined celibate.’ So he is still a celibate,” added Willie, folding up the paper—but he did not tell his wife, as he would once have done, that it was for her sake Ambrose was so.

She was quietly returning to her rake.

“He has gone out of our lives.” Willie was thoughtfully lighting his cigar, and after a few puffs, he continued: “And we needn’t grudge him his good fortune, more especially as it takes him right away from here. You were never quite easy with Oxford so near; and I did run across him once, though I held my tongue about it.”

“You did, Willie?”

"He was getting out of a train as I got in. He gave me a glare and shot past. I should have spoken to him if he had spoken to me."

"You would speak to a sweep." Olivia stopped and laughed.

After a minute, she rested on her rake and turned round. "I don't grudge Mr. Ambrose his prosperity, Willie; I don't grudge him success, and fame, and the plaudits of the world,—but I should have grudged him *your hand*. He is a base-hearted, selfish, tyrannical man, though"—she drew a long breath and added slowly—"he did me once a very great service."

END.



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